

I Will Light a Fire by evendanstevens

Series: [I Will Light a Fire \[1\]](#)

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Summary:

when Joyce, Will and Jane are taken by a vengeful Dr Brenner, it's up to Hopper to save his newfound family.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

- For [StarMaamMke](#).

'Brenner has Joyce, Will and Jane. What is Hopper doing? For the writer's block prompts.'

this is a prompt from the lovely starmaammke, this was originally meant to be a oneshot but nope let's make this a minific because there is simply too much potential here for a couple hundred words. also major apologies for not having updated 'Stay With Me Stay' this week, I promise I will post a new chapter in the next few days, it's been a crazy past couple of weeks.

but anywho, here's the first part, hope you enjoy!

As Hopper walked up the steps of the Byers' porch he could hear the music before he reached the door. The heavy electric guitar and angry drum beats of some rock band from the 70s Hopper had never listened to during that decade rung through his ears as he walked across the threshold. He wasn't sure when it was he'd began to enter the Byers household without knocking but he had felt an odd sense of comfort in the fact that Joyce trusted him to do so.

Of course he had been sneaking into their house a couple nights a week for the past three months now, so Joyce had given him a key some time ago for convenience.

When he walked into the living room his heart warmed as he watched Jane jumping on the couch while Will waved his body around frantically to the beat of the music by the boombox in the corner of the room. The music had been so loud they hadn't registered his appearance so he stood there for a while, enjoying the happiness in the scene playing out in front of him. Jane suddenly snapped her head round and caught sight of him. With a goofy grin on her face, she leapt off the sofa and vaulted over to him, wrapping her arms around his middle with such force it just about knocked the

wind out of him.

“Sorry, kid, didn’t mean to break up the party,” he bent down and nuzzled his nose in her hair before giving her a quick kiss on the head. They weren’t leaving for some time yet, Joyce had invited him to join them for dinner after his shift. Nevertheless, his presence usually meant the craziness Joyce didn’t mind putting up with was dialled down a couple notches.

Will smiled at Hopper and gave him a small wave hello before bending down and turning the music off.

“Hop is that you?” a voice called through from the kitchen. He thought it amusing that the music being turned off indicated his presence. He turned to go walk to the kitchen before Jane jumped up and lightly tapped his shoulders. He rolled his eyes in mock defeat at her signal requesting a piggy back ride. Truthfully he didn’t mind at all carrying the girl around on his back. He secretly liked when she got hyper like this, when she really let her hair down and was just overall happy. To him it meant she was finally getting to be a kid. And that’s all he really wanted for her.

She climbed onto the leg of the couch before carefully leaping onto his back as he walked them through to the kitchen, Will hot on their tail. When he walked into the kitchen he could already feel his face light up at the sight of her. Joyce was stood at the counter with her back to him, cutting up carrots before turning round and greeting him with a smile that could make the corners of even the sternest of men’s mouth twitch upwards. She crossed her arms as him with the young girl’s arms draped over his shoulder and shook her head with a laugh at the ridiculousness of it all.

“Hey, Chief, big day?” she asked jokingly. She knew as hell as he did that nothing ever happened in Hawkins. Well at least not now after the lab ceased to exist.

“Riveting as always,” he groaned sarcastically. “What have you guys been doing today?” he directed the question to the kids, knowing full well he would have his alone time with Joyce later that evening to properly catch up.

"I showed Jane how to play my Empire game," Will perked up first, inadvertently cutting off Jane as she began to speak and immediately looking guilty for doing so. Despite Hopper not being able to see her, he could tell she'd given him a reassuring look as Will's face then brightened again. "She was actually pretty good," Will said quietly, almost nervously. It wasn't normal for him to actually get his word in in a room full of people.

"We went to go visit Joyce at work," Jane chimed in. In the past couple of weeks, Hopper had allowed Jane to accompany her friends on outings. With it being summer, there were plenty of kids running around so it's not like she stood out amongst them, especially when she was hanging around with her little crew of pals.

"Oh really, is that so?" Hopper peered over his shoulder to smile at Jane and confusion came across him when he saw the secretive smirk on her face as she looked between Joyce and Will. He looked to Will who had the same expression as Jane but was staring at his shoes. Before he could ask what it was that she was holding in, she burst in a voice so loud and excited it made him flinch.

"Joyce has a date!" Jane proclaimed and Hopper's jaw immediately dropped but Joyce was too busy gasping at Jane to notice his startled expression.

"I do not!" Joyce insisted, wide eyes at Jane. She then dipped her head and stared nervously at the floor, dropping her arms and fiddling with her fingers. "The man just asked if I wanted to—"

"A handsome man!" Jane interceded, matter-of-factly. When Joyce didn't say anything, he watched in horror as a blush rose to her cheeks. A fear Jim never knew he had was now surfacing.

He let out a more-obvious-than-intended fake laugh as he unwrapped Jane's arms from around his neck and bending down to let her jump down off of his back. "Hey why don't you guys go play that Star Wars game and I'll give your mom a hand in the kitchen?" He propositioned to the kids. Jane immediately fled the room excitedly, happy to go play her newly discovered favourite game, but Will lingered. He looked between the two before focusing on Hopper, examining the false calm on his face. Will gave Hopper a questioning

look, but when Hopper's face didn't budge he slowly followed Jane out of the room.

Hopper had let out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding. The kid was too damn observant.

Joyce waited until the kids were back in the living room before she approached Hopper and wrapped her arms around his middle and reached up to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Hey," she murmured in an intimate tone she only used when the two of them were alone.

"Hey," Hopper involuntarily grumbled. His tone sent alarm bells ringing in Joyce's head and it was then she noticed how stiff he was in her arms and how his eyes wouldn't meet her own. He was angry.

"What's up with you?" she asked, concern plaguing her features as she looked up at him. Her arms stayed tightly wrapped around him, but when he didn't answer and continued to look straight ahead, she let go and backed away so that she now stood in his eye line. She tried to think what he could possibly be mad about. Normally when he was angry, he would still pull her close when she held him, or he would at least acknowledge the cheek kisses she gave him with a small hint of a smile that lasted for a half a second before he went back to brooding.

No, this time was different. This time he was mad at *her*. She thought back to what had happened, trying to pinpoint the moment that made him angry, and then she realised.

"Oh," she whispered as she put two and two together. "Wait you're not mad cause some guy asked me out?" she asked, hopeful it wasn't that, not wanting to open up a door full of complications. His eyes raised to hers then, the accusation striking him.

"No, why would I be mad?" he crossed his arms as he took the coward's way out with a nonchalant shrug.

Joyce held in a sigh and found herself nervously looking at the floor again. "Well, I mean, I know we haven't exactly discussed what-"

"Look, Joyce, if you want to go out with some guy, go for it," Hopper

said through gritted teeth, trying desperately to stay calm and brush it off. After all, was he really in any position to tell her not to go out with someone else? If that's what she wanted, did he have any right to say he fucking hated the idea of another man touching her the same way she does?

She didn't hold in the sigh that time as she brought a hand to her forehead before raking her hand through her hair, clearly uncomfortable with what she was going to say. "Hopper, I—"

He could feel it coming. The rejection. This was over, her date with this mystery man was enough to make her realise that she didn't want to be running around with Hopper in secret. What she now wanted was a man to treat her the way she deserved to be treated, a companion with whom she could go on dates, and introduce to the kids as her boyfriend and maybe even fall asleep in the same bed without one of them having to sneak out before dawn. He could understand that.

But despite his understanding, Hopper didn't think he could handle the sting of a rejection from Joyce Byers. So he stepped in before she could do so.

"Joyce, it's fine," he held up a comforting hand to her. And while he did just cut her off from whatever she was about to say, her lips did curl slightly into a small smile of relief. "You and me, we're nothing, you don't need to worry about it."

He had meant to sound comforting. Like he truly believed he and Joyce having no emotional obligation to each other was a good thing. But the way Joyce's face completely fell from hopeful to utter dismay, indicated that he may have said the wrong thing.

She blinked at him. "Nothing?" her voice was small yet there was a dormant anger behind her tone, threatening to wake.

He sighed and ran a hand over his face as he tried to find the right words. "Well, not 'nothing', I mean you and me, we're just screwing around, right?" he offered up but when Joyce laughed for a second, he knew fine well that what he just said was far from funny.

The definitely-not-happy smile spread across her face as she tilted her head to the side and blinked three times in disbelief. She looked up at him then and clasped her hands together, pointing her fingers towards him. He could see in her face that she was on the verge of fury, but when he looked in her eyes she saw the tears threatening to fall. "I was going to tell you I said no," she said in a way that made him think she was barely holding back an outburst.

Hopper was quiet as he dipped his head, feeling sheepish. He hadn't expected her to say no, he was ready for her to end it all now.

"But hey, maybe I should've said yes but I didn't realise we were just 'screwing around'," she hissed at him before storming back over to the counter to continue chopping carrots. The sound of the knife hitting the chopping board rung through the kitchen as she took out her frustrations on the orange vegetables in front of her. When he picked up on her mumbling frantically to herself, he became confused. She was obviously upset that he'd called whatever it was between them 'screwing around'. But his question was why?

"Joyce," he moved toward her cautiously, when she didn't answer, he took another step. "Joyce," he said in a firmer tone this time.

She spun round then and threw daggers at him, her eyes ablaze. "What, Jim?!" she hissed at him.

He was taken aback, her calling him 'Jim' had always been her way of indirectly telling him she was pissed off at him, it had been that way since they were kids. Her calling him that now was like a slap in the face.

"Jesus, Joyce what the hell is your problem?" he tried to keep his voice quiet, he really did, but his confusion was evolving into a frustrated anger he was struggling to contain. She didn't answer but eyes were still piercing through him and her face was reddening. "What? Because I said we were 'screwing around'?! Last time I checked Joyce that's exactly what we were doing! That you 'just wanted to fuck' those were your words, not mine!"

Her eyes softened but her animosity did not waiver. "That was three months ago! And yet here we are, about to have dinner with our

kids! So I'm sorry if maybe I thought there was something more here, but I guess I was wrong wasn't I?" her accusing eyes didn't move from his face.

Hopper shook his head. "No, no, no, you do not get to do that! This whole thing, this secret, this whole sneaking around was *your* call! You wanted no strings attached, and I gave you that. You didn't want anything except a good lay!"

She stood back, putting further space between them. "So what you're saying I just used you? Cause I don't remember you complaining," she brought her hands to her head again, tears were now streaming down her cheeks, her fingers running through her hair. "You had every opportunity to ask me out yourself, you had every chance to make this something more if that's what you wanted," she sighed.

Hopper let out a laugh of disbelief. "Oh yeah and when was that? When Lonnie left? When Will went missing? Or when Bob fucking *died*?" he had screamed.

When he saw the startled expression on her face he immediately regretted what he had said. She wasn't crying anymore, she was just looking at him in absolute astonishment. He could see the heartbreak on her face and he immediately wanted to escape.

"I have to get out of here," he practically whispered before making a dash for the living room. He didn't hear any footsteps following behind him. He saw Jane and Will sitting on the floor, staring at each other uncomfortably and it became clear that they had heard the argument. They may not have heard the actual words, but the raised voices and yelling had been enough of an indicator.

"Come on, Jane, let's go," Hopper said hastily as he grabbed her jacket that had been draped over the leg of the couch.

Jane looked up at him with a defiant expression. "No."

He sighed desperately. "Jane, come on, please," he pleaded when he heard Joyce come through from the kitchen.

It only took one look at Joyce's tear stricken face for Jane to glare at

Hopper, nostrils flaring. "No." she said sternly this time.

He looked between his adoptive daughter and the woman who's heart he'd just crushed and felt an overwhelming sense of guilt and shame. With one final look at Joyce, who now looked at him with sad eyes and an expression he couldn't read. He couldn't tell if she wanted him to stay or leave and going by the look on her face, neither did she.

He was already out the door and walking to his car before he'd realised he'd made the decision to leave.

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The next two hours had been spent with Hopper brooding around his cabin. He had come dangerously close to opening the bottle of bourbon he kept in a cabinet in his room, but he figured that would only make things worse. He had been an idiot. It had been the first time Joyce had indicated she wanted something more with him, the one thing Hopper wanted more than anything, and he had fucked it up. He cursed himself for being the black hole that he was.

Eventually he worked up the nerve to return to the Byers household to pick up Jane. If Joyce even wanted to speak to him, well, he would cross that bridge when he came to it. But considering the phone hadn't rang the whole time he was back in the cabin, he figured she didn't have anything to say, at least not yet.

But something was off when he pulled up to the Byers house. Both Joyce and Jonathan's cars were gone, but the living room light was still on. His eyebrows knotted together in a sense of bewilderment as he tried to figure out where Joyce had disappeared to. When he came up to the door, he didn't bother knocking.

But then he saw the state of the house. Furniture flipped, a new dent in the dry wall, pictures that decorated the hallway were now either tilted or strewn across the floor, it was clear signs of a struggle. He was about to double back to his car to fetch his gun but a figure appeared in front of him.

He looked up from the carnage to find Jonathan stood there, his eyes swollen with tears and the side of his head bleeding. Hopper darted

over to him and took his head in his hands and examined him. Jonathan began crying again and put his hands on Jim's arms.

"Jonathan what the hell happened? Are you hurt?" he questioned when he couldn't find a source of bleeding on the side of his head. Jonathan was stuttering, trying to make a sentence but nothing was coming out except strangled noises of panic. "Jonathan where's Jane? Will? Your mom? Are they alright?"

"Gone," was the first word the sniffing teenager managed to get out that sent panic coursing through Hopper. "He took them..." Jonathan trailed off when he burst into hysterical crying, clearly replaying a memory.

"Jonathan, who took them?" Hopper pressed for an answer, moving his hands to his shoulders, shaking him slightly. "Who was here? Who took them?!"

Jonathan took a deep breath and looked Hopper directly in the eye.

"Brenner."

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you so much for such a positive response to the first chapter, I am so humbled! I am so sorry if this chapter is full of mistakes, I am currently half asleep as I post this. Nevertheless, I hope you enjoy this chapter, special thanks to starmaammke for providing the 'motivation' to get this updated asap!

also side note, the song inspo for this fic is 'Light a Fire' by Rachel Taylor

“I’m coming with you!”

“Like hell you are!” Hopper yelled back over his shoulder as he stormed out to the Byers garden shed. Jonathan was hot on his heels. By the time Jonathan caught up to him, Hopper had already rummaged into the shed and retrieved their infamous shot gun.

“I can help,” Jonathan pleaded as Hopper checked to see if it was loaded and was sure to bring along spare ammunition.

Hopper didn’t look up from the task at hand as he refused him again. “No, you’re going to go to Wheelers and help keep Mike and Nancy and their family safe,” Hopper insisted as he clicked the shot gun back into place and moved back toward the house.

“Are you fucking serious?!” Jonathan whined throwing his hands in the air, not flinching when Hopper stopped and spun round at him with a scolding ‘hey!’. “They’re *my* family, Hopper! I need to save them!”

Hopper chose to ignore his backhanded outburst. He had no right to argue back and tell the kid they were as good as his own family, especially considering it was the first time he’d thought it. Hopper sighed. “Look, kid, I don’t have time fo-“

“I’m not some kid, I’m not like Will or Mike, I can do something, I

can *fight!*” Jonathan yelled back at him. They were now stood in the dimly lit kitchen, staring each other down. Angry tears had gathered in his eyes and his fists were clenched at his sides. He didn’t doubt Jonathan for a second that he could fight. He’d taken on that thing almost two years before, and considering the state of the Harrington kids face at the hospital the night Will came back, he knew he could hold his own if his fists were called for. Realistically, yes, Jonathan would be a good help.

But she was Joyce’s son. And in the extended time Hopper had spent with the family, he had started to see Jonathan as *his* son, same as Will. And parents never let their kids get in the crossfire. But it’s not like he could tell Jonathan that, he doubted he would understand the paternal feelings Hopper had gained towards the teenager.

“Jonathan,” Hopper moved around to him and tried to be as gentle as he could as he put his hands on his shoulders and bent down slightly to his height. “I need you to trust me, alright? I need you to trust that I’m going to get them back, okay? All of them, I’m going to bring them home,” Hopper emphasised and tried his best not to choke up himself when the threatening tears in the boy’s eyes eventually fell. While Jonathan had definitely taken after his father in physical appearance, there was something about the way he cried that screamed Joyce at him. It was then that Hopper pulled him into an embrace and let him sob for a moment. “I’m gonna save them,” Hopper said quietly as he squeezed Jonathan tighter, except this time he wasn’t sure if he was reassuring the boy, or himself.

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After quickly dropping Jonathan off at the Wheelers, Hopper gave Karen a half-assed explanation of an emergency with Joyce and Will in order to convince her to let her very-much-teenage daughter’s boyfriend stay the night. He had told her to keep this under the radar, and the look of rushed understanding on her face made him believe he could trust her to do as he said. They had ran in the same circle in high school and despite their distance over the years, she still trusted him to do right by Joyce, no matter what had happened. She had waved him off with a nod, silently signalling that she would do her part in whatever was happening.

It wasn't until he was alone in the car and driving to the payphone not too far from the outskirts of town that the panic began to set in. Brenner had Jane again. Hopper had sworn to protect her from her own monster the same way she had protected all of them from their own literal monster, and he had failed her. He had let her slip back into the hands of the evil men who robbed her of her childhood and innocence, back into the hands of the man who wanted to poke and prod at her like some lab rat. He had promised...

Friends don't lie.

And yet that's exactly what he had done. True, he hadn't known that it was a lie every time he told her the bad men wouldn't take her, but it had been a lie all the same. And now all he could think about was what the hell they could be doing to her. To his little girl. His breath was shaking as he let out a gasp and realised he was crying. Tears of frustration and fear of what could possibly be happening to her right now. His stomach lurched at the thought of her, cold and alone, locked in some room wondering where her dad was and why he hadn't saved her, why he hadn't stopped the bad men. His hand gripped the steering wheel in anger.

And then he thought of Will. He could understand why Brenner had wanted Will, to run more of his sick experiments no doubt. The kid had been in literal hell, and Brenner the sick fuck probably wanted to know exactly what that was like. He probably wanted to cut him up and look into his brain and run as many uncomfortable and agonising tests as he could against the kid and Hopper felt his anger only grow. Will was a good kid, even despite everything, he was one of the smartest, kindest and gentlest kids Hopper had ever met. His time for tests and doctors were over, it was time for him to be a child again, to go back to normal. And Brenner was about to rob him of that. Will didn't deserve this, he didn't deserve any of it.

And then his mind went to Joyce, the total enigma of it all. Hopper understood the obsession with Will and with Jane, but why Joyce? He felt his grip on the steering wheel soften when he thought of her. Jane had a fighting chance, Will was a valuable asset, but Joyce... what was to stop them hurting her? His chest tightened, he didn't want to think about Joyce like that. He just needed to find her.

When he reached the phone booth, he immediately called Doctor Owens. He explained to the man who had very obviously just been asleep what had happened. And while Owens had expressed he wasn't sure what he could do to help, as he was all the way in California now, Hopper was still sure he would do what he could. Hopper had asked him if he had any idea where Brenner may have gone, or where he could've been keeping them, but Owens had said that the trail they had on Brenner had gone cold not long after the winter of '83.

After their call, Hopper sighed and lit up a cigarette as he tried desperately to think. But as he moved out of the phonebooth, the shrill sound of it ringing behind him made him jump. He never went fully back into the booth, he just quickly reached for the phone and pulled it to his ear.

"Chief Hopper," the voice on the other side of the phone made Jim hold his breath. He knew the voice in an instant. The voice of the same man who had walked into the room where they held Hopper before, held out his cigarettes to him and asked him where 'she' was.

"Where are you?" Hopper hissed through the phone.

"I think it's time you and I had a talk," Brenner's voice on the other end sounded as eerily calm as it had the last time he'd heard it, twenty one months ago.

"Where are you keeping them?" Hopper's knuckles at turned white at the sharp grip he held on the phone.

"Why, they're home," Brenner made a menacing attempt to sound obvious before Hopper slammed the phone down on the receiver and marched back to his car. Putting the Blazer in drive, his foot practically hitting the floor with the accelerator as he sped down the road toward Hawkins lab.

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Hawkins Lab, from the outside look relatively the same. It was still the daunting building that stuck out like a sore thumb in the town, gated off to the public for the last eight months. Due to the lack of

general upkeep, the grass that surrounded it had overgrown, weeds had gathered round the walls and the place seemed to look all the more looming than it had before. It wasn't as well lit as before, the bright lights only illuminated about three floors, hinting to Hopper that whoever Brenner had in on this twisted operation, it wasn't nearly as many people as it had been the first time around. He saw this as at least one good thing.

He had parked his Blazer not far from the gates but still out of sight. He would've parked further away but with a heavy heart he worried for the condition his captive family would be in when he found them and mad dash would likely be necessary. He had grabbed the weapons he had, the Byers shotgun strapped to his back and his service gun, as well as any further ammunition he would require. He had sneaked into the building the same way he had long ago. Through the back, his gun aimed straight ahead.

The lights being on where the only indication that the place hadn't been totally deserted. Paper lay strewn all over the floor, dust and cobwebs covered the walls and the florescent lights flickered ominously. He kept his back to the wall as he crept down the hall, careful to check in every room he passed and cautiously approach each corner. He wasn't sure how long he'd been walking around the building, he knew that they knew he was there, so why hadn't they come to find him?

He was about to let out a yell of frustration when he came to what felt like the fiftieth door when the door turned out to be locked on the other side. Taking a step back to kick it down, it was then he heard the soft knocking that made him freeze. He slowly approached the door and pressed his ear up against it, trying to listen harder. The knocking was quiet, such a dull sound it almost sounded like it was coming from deep inside the room. But as the door trembled ever so slightly he could tell it was up against the door. When the knocking continued, his eyes widened at the realisation.

It was Morse code.

Dot-dot-dot-dot dot dot-dash-dot dot.

Here.

Hopper tried his best not to cry out of relief. And when the knocking then spelled out ‘Will’, his heart leapt. Thinking quickly and wary of any possible camera’s on him, Hopper turned to face the door and hid his hand with his hip as he knocked back to Will.

Alone?

Yes.

They know?

No. Hiding.

Hopper recalled what Jane had told him about how Will was good at hiding. How games of hide and seek could go on for hours because Will could vanish so easily and remain hidden for the entirety of the game without anyone ever finding him. The boys had realised that this was why he had managed to stay alive in the Upside Down for as long as he did. Blood sniffing monsters couldn’t even find him.

Hopper was thankful for this now as he thought a silent ‘thank you’ to whatever power had allowed Will to escape his captors and get himself to safety. But nevertheless, if the cameras in the hall were working, they would’ve figured out by now that something on the other side of the door had peaked his interest. But he couldn’t risk grabbing Will now and fleeing with him, not while Joyce and Jane were nowhere to be found. He only had one shot at this, and as much as he wanted to scoop the boy up and whisk him away to a safer place, he couldn’t. Thinking quickly, Hopper realised he didn’t have time to tap the necessary instructions to Will.

“Hey, kid, can you hear me?” Hopper said in a voice just barely above a whisper. “Knock once if you can hear me.” There was a pause on the other side of the door, followed by a hesitant knock. “Okay, listen carefully. Now there’s a good chance that I’ve been here long enough for them to know that there’s something in this room.” He sighed, regretfully and rested his head against the door. He needed to sound strong. “And we can’t leave just yet without your mom and Jane,” he paused, giving Will a moment to process the information. “So what I’m going to do is,” he reached behind him and pulled the shotgun off his back. “I’m going to leave the shotgun here,

you know how to use it right? Knock once for yes, two for no.”

There was a knock once straight away.

“That’s good, kid, that’s real good,” Hopper breathed, the relief evident in his tone. “Now I’m going to go down the hall and create a diversion, okay? When you hear the sound of a gun going off I don’t want you to get spooked, I’ll be alright but that’s your signal to unlock the door and grab the gun.” He paused again, giving him time. “Once you’ve got the gun, go back inside and lock the door. Don’t let anyone in, when I come back I’ll give you the secret knock. Do you understand what you need to do?”

There was that hesitation on the other side of the door again and Hopper felt his stomach tighten when he heard a tremored gasp. He was scared.

“Listen, bud, I know it’s scary, but you’ve been through so much worse and you’ve always come out the other end. Right now, I need you to be brave,” Hopper stopped himself when he felt his own voice waiver and he tried desperately to pull himself together. “You’re so much stronger than you know, Will. You can do this, can’t you?”

There was a lapse in any sound or movement on the other side. Followed swiftly by a single knock.

Hopper smiled to himself, a slither of pride hitting him in the tense moment. “You got this, kid,” he said encouragingly as he propped the gun up against the wall next to the door. “Now remember, wait for my signal.” Will knocked one more time and Hopper took a deep breath. “Good luck, Will.”

And then Hopper was running down the hall. As much as he wanted to stay with the kid, hold him in his arms as he had with his older brother not an hour beforehand, and tell him everything was okay, he knew he couldn’t. And it pained him to run away and leave him alone. At least he knew the boy wasn’t completely unprotected, he had the gun now after all. He just prayed he wouldn’t have to use it.

After turning two corners he fired his gun into the air whilst on the move, the sound almost deafening as the bullet flew past his ear. He

didn't wait to listen for the sound of a door unlocking then closing again, he had to keep moving. It was the best chance he and Will had of getting out with their loved ones in tow. But as he ran round the corner, he realised his signal had worked a little too well.

Waiting for him round the corner were four men in suits, with guns aimed right at Hopper. He considered holding his gun up at them and at least trying to fight his way out of this one. But then he was no use to anyone dead.

Instead, he lowered his gun to his side and holstered it, holding his arms up in a half-assed surrender.

"Evening, fellas," he gave the men a sarcastic half smile before they advanced on them. One of them confiscated his gun, another kept his gun aimed on him while the other two restrained his arms behind his back. No of them said anything as they forcefully led him down the hall.

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They led him into a room, surprisingly not the white interrogation room they had kept him in last time, but one of the security closets they had hid in when the lab was under attack. The room caused a stream of bad memories to come flooding back to him. They had been in a room like this when Bob had decided to put his life on the line to save them all. Hopper had remembered how he himself had no question of sacrificing himself in order to get them out, but it would have been no use. The guilt was overflowing inside of him. It should've been him. It should've been Hopper telling Bob not to wait for him. It should've been Bob promising he'd keep them safe, they he would protect them. But instead, Hopper had watched as Bob had pulled Joyce into his arms for what would turn out to be their final goodbye.

He tried his best not to think about Joyce and what could possibly be happening to her right now but he couldn't help it. He couldn't help the way his mind travelled to all kinds of scenarios that made him want to be sick. He should've been there. He shouldn't have stormed out like an idiot. He should've pulled Joyce into his arms and never let go. He didn't want to imagine the fear on her face as men stormed

her home and took her. Had she been thinking the same as him? That he should've have left, that he should have been with her? He wanted to be sick then but not with fear of the unknown but with crippling culpability.

It was then that the door screeched open and the echo of dress shoes clicking off the floor filled the room. Hopper looked up with pure malice when he saw him standing there that soon turned to absolute disturbance. It was clearly Brenner standing in front of him, fitted black suit and platinum white hair, but his face. His face was severely scarred, with horrific former gashes that stretched all the way from his eyebrow and down his neck, disappearing into his suit where Hopper had no doubt they had continued. They had all believed him to be dead and the sickening marks on his face proved that they had good reason to think so.

Yet even with his new found disfigurement, he still projected this aura of unsettling evil that was enough to unnerve even Jim Hopper.

"Chief Hopper," nothing in his body moved except his lips when he spoke, his eyes unblinking as he stared him down. One of the men who had cornered Hopper followed him into the room and closed the door behind him. Brenner moved to the opposite corner of the room, leaning against the table that surrounded the wall of the room and crossed his arms.

"Where are they?" was all Hopper could ask.

Brenner tilted his head to the side and Hopper was reminded of a cobra eyeing up his prey. "I'm afraid you will need to be mo-"

"Will, Joyce and Jane, cut the shit, where are they?" Hopper interceded with a frustrated hiss.

"Jane?" Brenner feigned confusion as he narrowed his eyes at Hopper. "Ah, yes, that's what you call her isn't it? *Jane*."

"Well it is her name," Hopper didn't take his eyes off of Brenner as his expression remained unchanged. "The name you stole from her. Just like how you stole everything else from her."

Brenner gave an amused ‘hmpf’. “It really is funny, Mr Hopper, how you believe that after the short while you’ve kept her hidden away, you really think you know everything there is to know about her.”

“I know enough,” Hopper seethed at him through gritted teeth. “And I know plenty about all the fucked up shit you did to her.”

“Funny,” Brenner sighed, a small smile on his face. “That really didn’t seem to bother you all that much the last time we spoke.” Hopper turned away from him then and looked at the floor. “What was it you called her again? Oh yes, a ‘little science experiment’, wasn’t it?”

“Enough.” Hopper tried not to yell. He would not have Brenner rub his face in the guilt Hopper would forever feel about having betrayed Jane in the beginning of their relationship. It ate away at him so much he still had never had the heart to tell her about the deal he had once made with Brenner. He had wanted Jane to trust him, and he knew that if she knew the truth about how they came into each other’s lives the way they had, that she may never trust him again.

“Where is she? Where is Will? Where is Joy-“

“Joyce Byers,” Brenner even saying her name was all it took for Hopper to lift his head and look at him with questioning eyes. He was smiling knowingly at him, making Hopper want to leap out of his chair and punch the look off his face. “You know, that was one thing I never understood. Why you were so adamant about saving the life of that woman’s son. Why you risked your life to help her. After all, she was the town nut wasn’t she?” Brenner paused to watch the defensive expression grow on Hopper’s face. He reached behind him then and pulled out a file and threw it into Hopper’s lap. “And then I realised.”

Hopper hesitantly opened the file in front of him and saw red. Inside the file was a photograph of Hopper and Joyce in his office, not two weeks before. It was taken from outside of his window, the blinds tilted ever so slightly but not enough to block out the view of Hopper kissing her lovingly as she draped her arms around his neck.

He pushed the anger, the fury and the need to strangle Brenner right there on the spot down into the pit of his stomach. It still remained

enough however to make Hopper's jaw clench and his grip on the file to crumple the paper.

"I want to see her," he stated blankly in an irate whisper.

Brenner moved himself off the table and came up to the side of Hopper. "I thought you might," Brenner mused and moved his body forward to push a button on the switchboard in front of him. One of the screens on the wall in front of them illuminated and Hopper found himself rising from his seat.

On screen was Joyce, who appeared to be unharmed, handcuffed to a chair. She was wildly thrashing in her seat, trying desperately to get free. There was no audio but he could see that she was screaming, not out of pain, thankfully, but out of anguish. She looked frantic as she yelled for whoever could hear her, if anyone for that matter, to presumably let her go. He felt a pang in his chest when, even in the blurriness of the image, he could see that tears of frustration and fear were streaming down her face. How in despite of the desperation and outrage, she looked genuinely afraid.

"Why her?" Hopper's eyes stayed glued to the screen but he noticed Brenner turn his head to face him. "Will and Jane, as fucked up as it is, I can understand why you took them. But why Joyce? What does she have to do with all this?"

Brenner looked back to the screen and clasped his hands behind his back. "I trust in your extensive research of this facility that you came across Terry Ives?"

Hopper's head immediately whipped round as he remembered the living vegetable that was Jane's biological mother. The concern on Hopper's face clearly amused Brenner as his lips curled into a small smile once more. "Yes, she was quite something, wasn't she?" Brenner still did not meet his eyes as kept looking at Joyce. "Miss Ives came to this place more than once, looking a lot like Mrs Byers does now," Brenner gestured to the screen with a nod and Hopper was yet again met with the sight of a panicking and enraged Joyce. "For too long we let her wage her little war against us and the work we were doing, she was never too much of a problem," Brenner shook his head at the memory.

"But then she went to the press. And they swarmed this place like flies. Of course, they never did find anything. But that never stopped her," Brenner paused as he continued to watch Joyce on the screen. "And then one day, Terry Ives stormed our facility with a gun and threatened to destroy everything we had worked for. And well, I assume you know what happened next."

Hopper turned to Brenner with furrowed brows and the anger was suddenly becoming too difficult to suppress. "And what exactly does that have to do with Joyce?"

Brenner shrugged his head to the side. "It is not often you encounter someone like Terry Ives. A fiercely protective mother, willing to do anything to get her children back. Someone's who's resilience often leads to acts of stupidity and sometimes even life threatening levels of danger," Brenner turned to look at Hopper, who's neck muscles were now pulsing and his fists clenched at his sides as he tried to keep his eyes on Joyce. "So of course, much like the case with poor Miss Ives, when someone like that comes along, it is within our duty to take care of them."

Something inside of Hopper snapped as he remembered what Terry had been mumbling the last time he had taken Jane to see her.

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Brenner offers Hopper a deal.

Notes for the Chapter:

once again I am overwhelmed with the response to this fic, thank you all so much for all your kudos and comments I am so humbled! And I am so sorry...

enjoy!

The last thing Hopper remembered when he came to was going for Brenner's throat before being consumed with darkness. Brenner's body guard must've have knocked him out because now Hopper was on the floor with the florescent lights above his head irritating his eyes as he tried to bring them into focus. From the looks of the sky outside he figured he hadn't been out for too long, it was still dark outside, but was that long enough for Brenner to have escaped with his family in tow?

Hopper began to panic as he realised his stupidity. He should've kept his cool, kept Brenner talking, try to find a way out to find the kids and Joyce. But there was no calming down the anger he had felt when Brenner had hinted at his plans for Joyce. It was a fate worse than death, in Hopper's opinion, and the thought of anyone even remotely hurting Joyce had shaken him to his core. He had to get out of here, he had to find them.

Bringing his knees up to his chest and sitting up, he surveyed the room around him. He was no longer in the security room but in what appeared to be in a room similar to the one Joyce had been in when he had watched her on the screen. He pulled himself up, still woozy from whatever drug or force had kept him down, and made his way to the door. Unsurprisingly the door was locked and Hopper searched the room desperately trying to find something to somehow break down a metal door.

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Jane had awoken in pure fear, her head flying off the pillow beneath her as she sat up. She was panting, the memories playing in her mind as she had 'slept'. She had remembered sitting in the Byers' living room, happily drawing with Will and trying to ignore the saddened look on Joyce's face as she had stared at the TV, clearly not watching it. Jonathan had been playing music in his room. She had sensed the force coming to the door before she heard it.

In an all too fast instant, the front door had been battered open and a flood of men with guns entered the house. Before she could react, before she could blast the intruders out with her abilities, she had felt a sharp pain in her arm before collapsing on the ground. The last thing she heard before passing out was Joyce screaming.

She knew fine well who was behind the unprecedented attack. She knew it was Papa. Which made her recognition of the room around her all the more terrifying. It was her room. It was the same bed, the same drawing on the wall of her and the man she once considered to actually love her. As it all came to her, she began to scream. Screams of fear, frustration and panic. She lifted her hand to the door and with her powers she pulled it off it's hinges. She was about to storm out of the room when six armed men stormed the room.

They had all held their guns at her, and Jane was about to dispatch of them when she heard it again. Joyce screaming. But this time it wasn't coming from two feet away from her, this time it was down the hall.

"Yeah you hear that?" One of the men said quickly, Jane snapping her head round in his direction. "Anything happens to us, she's gonna be doing a lot worse than screaming."

Jane felt tears spring to her eyes. She wanted out, she wanted to kill every man in that room who was aiming a gun at her. But she always didn't want anything to happen to her friends. Reluctantly, she held up her hands in a surrender.

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Hopper had been trying to break the door down for a good ten minutes with a metal chair but all it had done so far was leave a couple of dents and bend one of the legs of the chair. When he heard the door click on the other side he abruptly stepped back but refused to put down the chair, holding it above his head ready to attack whoever it was.

When he saw Brenner walk through, calmly as ever he was instantly reminded of his words against Joyce and was ready to smack him across the face with the chair. But then he remembered he had a job to do and hesitantly lowered the chair to the ground. Brenner gave an all too pleased smile of content and nodded his head slightly.

"I see we've decided to calm down a bit," Brenner mused, Hopper noticed he had left the door open behind him which he felt was promising.

Hopper sighed and looked at the ground. "Look, please, just give me back Joyce and the kids and we can forget this ever happened," Hopper attempted to bargain in the calmest voice he could muster, not wanting to get knocked out again any time soon.

"I'm afraid I can't do that," Brenner replied, not a hint of remorse in his voice to match his words. Hopper hadn't exactly expected him to agree to his offer. "But I am willing to negotiate with you for the release of Joyce Byers."

Hopper's eyes flashed up as he arched an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

Brenner moved to the side to allow him to exit the room and Hopper did as intended, willing to play whatever game Brenner wanted to play if it meant getting any closer to getting them out of there as soon as possible. Brenner didn't say anything and simply led him along the hallway into another room. When Hopper stepped in his hear leapt.

They were on the other side of the glass of the room Joyce was in. She was no longer screaming and yelling. She looked defeated, but very much alive. Her head was dipped, her chin on her chest, shoulder's slumped. Her hair was draped in front of her face so Hopper couldn't see her eyes but he could tell by the way her chest

heaved that she was crying. It made him ache.

“You can have Joyce back, you two can walk out of here,” Brenner said suddenly, almost startling Hopper who was transfixed on Joyce. He turned to Hopper then, hands clasped behind his back. “If you can convince her to leave, to leave Will in our care and never to bother us.”

Hopper scoffed quietly. “You know as well as I do she’s not going to agree to that,” his eyes remained trained on Joyce.

“And you know what will happen if she doesn’t,” Brenner regarded in a matter-of-fact tone. Hopper felt the urge to go for him again, but instead he clenched his fists at his sides, trying to remain in control of his emotions.

“Why would you do it anyway?” Hopper looked at him then and Brenner gave him a rather confused look. “Let us go, let us walk out of here. Why wouldn’t you kill me? We both know that would be the easier option.”

Brenner huffed and turned his attention to Joyce, not wanting to look at Hopper for some reason. “Let’s just say that at this point you’re far more useful to us alive.”

Hopper had no idea what he meant, or what horrendous plan Brenner had concocted. But for now he pushed it to the back of his mind and focused on Joyce. He wanted to see her, he wanted to hold her. He just wanted her to know that he was there, that he was here with her.

He sighed and rubbed his face with his hand. “Alright,” he nodded. “I’ll talk to her, but you need to let me take those damn handcuffs off of her.”

Brenner thought for a moment before reaching into his pocket and pulling a small key out of his pocket. He dangled it in the air, still not looking at Hopper as he snatched the key from him and made his way out of the room. A guard opened the door for him and Hopper walked in with his head hanging low.

He glanced up when the guard closed the door behind him and

watched as Joyce slowly raised her head. And then he saw it. The bright red mark of an already forming bruise on her cheekbone. Her eyes were red from stinging tears and he now realised that she had been dry sobbing. But when her eyes registered that it was him standing in front of her the tears returned to her.

“Hop,” she wept with a whisper, her voice dry and hoarse.

While his first instinct was to run to her and hold her in his arms, he instead slowly walked around the back of her and freed her wrists from the cuffs. She brought her arms up and rubbed her wrists aggressively and he noticed the reddened irritated skin, she had struggled against her restraints for god knows how long and had probably come pretty close to breaking something.

She hissed with a pained relief as she smoothed the skin before looking up at Hopper. He was now crouched in front of her, unsure of how to react to her, his stupid insecurities afraid that she was still mad at him after their fight. Instead, however, she let out a shaky gasp before burying her head in his chest and sobbing. Hopper immediately wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against him as she moved her head to the crook of his neck. He rubbed her head for a moment in a comforting motion before holding her out in front of her.

“They took Will... they took Jane,” Joyce panted between sobs. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry I couldn’t stop them... I couldn’t,” she struggled to breathe as the guilt took over every nerve of her body and Hopper instinctively pulled her into his arms again.

“It’s not your fault, Joyce,” he murmured against the hair of her crown, fighting back tears of his own now. “I should’ve been there. I should’ve been with you,” he thought out loud as his own guilt rose to the surface.

Joyce took a deep breath as she pulled away from him and rubbed her eyes. “You’re here now,” she whispered.

He brought a hand to her cheek and felt anger rise in him when she winced as his finger gently brushed the mark on her face. “Did they do this?” Hopper raised his eyebrows as he inspected the mark with a

concealed rage. She looked away from him and straight to the floor and that was answer enough for him. "I'll fucking kill them. I'll—"

"I don't care about that, Hop," she cut him off with a saddened groan and her glazed eyes met his again. "Where's my boy?" she whispered with a heart breaking squeak. "What are they doing to my boy? What do they want from us?"

It was Hopper's turn to look at the floor then. He moved his hand to the back of her head, his thumb stroking her jaw, using whatever small touch he could to reassure her that he was there for her. "They want," Hopper cleared his throat, trying to find the words. "They want to study him, they want to run tests on him. Him and Jane, like they did before." He tried desperately to hide the hurt in his voice as he pictured those evil men and women experimenting on his adopted daughter and practically new found son. He couldn't bring himself to look at Joyce, but he could tell by the wavering breath she let out that she was thinking the same thing.

"They can't do that... no, not my son, not little Jane..."

He looked up at her then and gently tighten his grip on her head, staring deeply into her eyes. "Hey, I'm not going to let them, okay?" he said quietly enough so Brenner couldn't hear from the other side of the wall or wherever it was that he was probably listening to them. "You hear me, Joyce? I won't let them," he said firmly enough to cause Joyce to nod. She believed him that he would do anything in his power to protect Jane and Will, but the real question was would he be able to do it? Would he really be able to save them?

"But there's something else," Hopper murmured hesitantly as Joyce brought her eyes to him again in a questioning manner. "They offered me a deal. They said that you can walk out of here, that you can leave now," he paused with a heavy sigh and looked away from her for a moment. "If you promise to leave them, and Will alone. If you let them take Will with them and forget about this place..."

"Like hell I would ever fucking do that!" Joyce just about yelled before Hopper silently tried to hush her.

"That's what I told them," he brought his other hand up and took her

quivering hand in his. “But Joyce,” he looked at their joined hands. “They said that if you didn’t agree, that if you didn’t agree to let them take Will-“

“That what, they’d kill me?” she said, alarmingly fearlessly. He looked at her then and was met with the same face he had encountered so often when Will had been missing. It was the face of the determined mother that she was, the mother who never gave up on her son, who would lay her life down to save him without a second thought. It was one of her most admirable qualities, her strength and resilience when it came to her children. It was one of the many reasons Hopper had been so drawn to her, this unrelenting courage and tenacity that she’d had since they were kids.

It pained his chest then to think of them as children, decades ago. Two innocent, little shits running around town causing havoc at every turn without a care in the world. Joyce with her handmade clothes that never did seem to fit properly, Hopper with his scruffy hair, almost twice the size of all the other kids, even back then. They were quite the pair of misfits but they were too busy laughing and having fun to give two fucks. And now here they were, two grown adults, two parents on the verge of losing everything they held dear.

“No, they wouldn’t kill you, Joyce, they, uh,” he slumped his shoulders in defeat. How did he even begin to tell her? “Do you remember Jane’s mom?”

He squeezed his eyes shut when Joyce let out a quiet gasp of understanding. Again, he couldn’t look at her.

“No...” she whispered. “No they...”

This time Hopper had pulled her into his arms before she blew into a panic attack. He’d known the symptoms since they were in high school, they way her eyes went wild, how her breathing became unsteady and sweat began to form at her brow and in her palms. He let her cry then, shake in his arms and Hopper bit his lip and breathed deeply, fighting in own pain as Joyce let out her own.

Contrary to Hopper's belief, Brenner had not stayed to watch his interaction with Joyce. Instead he had wandered down the hall to where he was keeping her.

When he entered the room, Jane was sitting on her bed with her knees under her chin, weeping quietly. When she registered his presence and looked up at him, she scurried up the bed to where the frame met the corner of the wall.

"Stay away," she tried to sound demanding but her trembling voice was riddled with unease. She stared at him wide eyed and fearful when he sat on the edge of the bed.

He looked at her with furrowed brows. He was taking in the side braid that Joyce had styled for her earlier that day and the small amount of eye makeup she had taken a liking to. She was dressed in an oversized Led Zeppelin t-shirt that had belonged to Hopper back in the 70s on top of a pair of cropped denim jeans. All far different from the hospital gowns she had constantly been made to wear. "My child, what did they do to you?" he raised a hand to her face and she pulled away sharply. He retracted his hand slowly.

"Why am I here?" she whispered, her expression unchanging.

Brenner smiled at her. "Why, I wanted to bring you home," he said, like the answer was so simple.

She shook her head violently. "No, no this is not home. This is a prison," she hissed at him with a venom that surprised him and caused his expression to lift as he looked at her wide eyed.

He blinked at her. "But you were happy here, don't you remember? I let you draw and read your nursery rhyme."

"You hurt me," she cut him off, further astonishing him. "You put needles in me, you made me do things I didn't want-" her voice trailed off as she tried her best not to relive the pain the man in front of her had caused her.

"You know why we had to do those things, child. You were special, we needed to understand you, to help you."

“No,” there was anger in her voice now as she scowled at him. The lights began to flicker and Brenner’s face fell. “You used me. You are *bad*, Papa.”

“Is that what he told you?” Brenner raised his brows at her. “That policeman, the one who thinks he’s your Papa?”

Jane nodded slowly. “Yes. He told me the truth. He is my Dad, and he is *nothing* like you,” she raised her voice then and the lights were vigorously flashing now.

Brenner considered her for a moment. “But he kept you locked away didn’t he?” The lights stopped and remained lit as Jane’s glare faded. “He lied to you, he didn’t let you see your friends, he kept you a prisoner.”

She blinked at him. “He was protec-“

“Protecting you?” Brenner finished for her with a presumptuous expression. “Or protecting everyone else?” Brenner tilted his head as Jane looked away from him, unsure what to reply. “I can help you, Eleven. I can make you better.”

“Jane,” she corrected him straight away. “And I want my Dad. I want to go home.”

Brenner sighed and looked at his hands with a shrug. “He’s here, you know,” Jane’s eyes lit up and she raised her head intently. “He came here to protect you, as you say.” Brenner saw Jane’s mouth curve into a small proud smile then when she looked to the door, hope shining in her view. “But I wonder if you would protect him too?”

Jane’s head snapped back round, her broad eyes fixated on him. “What?”

Brenner smiled to himself for half a second before raising his head to her, feigning sadness. “There are a lot of men here who want to hurt him. Maybe even kill him,” he contained his delight as he watched the dread wash over her. “But you can save him.”

She dipped her head toward him, still cautious of the man in front of her but determined. “How?”

Brenner put a hand over hers and she let him this time, his eyes bearing into her own. "If you come with us."

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After Joyce had calmed down, she and Hopper had sat there for a while in silence. She had pulled away from him but kept her hands in his. She was staring ahead of her in her seat, her eyes blank, biting down furiously on her lip as she thought.

"So what are you going to do?" Hopper asked eventually. He hadn't taken his eyes off of her the whole time they had not spoken.

Her eyes widened and she shrugged. "I don't know... I mean I can't just let them take Will. But I can't exactly save him if they fry my brain," she whispered quickly, her gaze frantic.

"Even if they did let you go there's a strong chance you wouldn't be able to find him," Hopper said bluntly. He didn't want them to hurt her, he certainly didn't want them to turn her into a mindless vessel. But he couldn't lie to her. At least not about this.

Her body slumped and she chewed harshly on her lip. As she was about to draw blood, Hopper reached up and placed his hand on her cheek, bringing her attention to him to stop her hurting herself. It seemed to work as her lips parted as she looked at him. She was quiet again then, but this time she stared at him. It was hard for him to place her expression. There was rare mixture of emotions of her eyes, a mixture of fear, sadness and somewhere way in the back he placed adoration.

Then suddenly, her eyes softened and a calm look came across her face. She tenderly pulled her hand away from his and placed it on his cheek, mirroring his actions.

"I know what I need to do," she sighed, an unexpected calm in her voice. He brought his free hand to rest on top of hers.

"Joyce I can't let you throw away your life..." he murmured, fingers stroking her own.

She shook her head lightly. "I'm not. I'm going to save my son, Hop.

But I need my mind to do that,” she said assertively.

He smiled slightly at that, but there was a deep rooted sorrow behind it. He had told her that they would let them go. But what he hadn't told her was that he had no intention of going with her. As soon as Joyce's safety was ensured, he was letting her go and staying in that lab to fight those bastards and save their children. He knew fine well the odds were more than stacked against him, but dammit he needed to try. Even if he got him killed, he wasn't walking away without those kids.

But Joyce could.

He stood up then and pulled her to her feet. “You sure about this?” he brought his finger to her chin and lifted her head so their eyes met.

She smiled at him softly. “I'm sure,” to Hopper's surprise she stood on her tip toes and brought her lips to his. It was a short, tame kiss but it was passionate nonetheless. He had pulled her closer toward him and wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her slightly before they both pulled away and rested their foreheads against each other's.

He should probably tell her now. Not just about his plan but about everything else. About the true feelings he held for her, how if he ever made it out of this, he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. He wanted to spend the rest of his time on this earth laughing with her, kissing her, arguing with her, learning with her, worshipping her, admiring her. Loving her.

But Hopper had to also face the probability that this was most likely the last time they would be together. He felt a twist in his stomach at the thought. Would she mourn him the same way she mourned Bob? Would she cry herself to sleep, only to wake up in the dead of night screaming his name? Would the heartache and unnecessary guilt drive her to near insanity as those first months without Bob had? Somehow he doubted it. Joyce had loved Bob, he had been good for her, his death had signified her loss of a normal life.

With Hopper all he brought was death and destruction and complication and sadness. He tried to reason with himself that Joyce

was probably going to be better off without him, maybe even happier without all the complex difficulty he brought to her life. He argued internally that this would bring him comfort, but he knew deep down it wasn't true in the slightest.

Nonetheless, he pulled back and gave her a reassuring smile before taking her by the hand and leading her out of the room.

He wasn't surprised to find Brenner standing there as they stepped out in front of the guard behind them who had been standing watch by the door. Joyce eyed the guard suspiciously, an absent look in her eye that went unnoticed by him who was staring straight ahead, barely acknowledging the pair. When Brenner caught sight of the pair and their joined hands he smiled, condescendence written all over his face.

"Mrs Byers," he brought his hands to the front and looped his fingers into a basket before rocking back on his heels ever so slightly. "I trust we've come to a decision."

Joyce was silent. Hopper looked down at her when she didn't say anything. And then he felt her hand leave his and it all happened so quickly for him to stop it. Yet it all seemed to happen in slow motion.

Joyce had backed up a step, her hand reaching behind her and straight into the holster of the guard behind her. Her hands gripped the gun as she pulled it up in front of her and pulled the trigger before Hopper could yell at her to stop. But as her hands shook violently she narrowly missed his body as Brenner fell to the ground for cover and the guard quickly came up behind Joyce and smacked the gun out of her hand. It fell to the floor and he kicked it far out of Hopper's reach before he grabbed Joyce round the waist.

The sound of gun shots had altered the guards around the corner who had all sprinted to the scene. Before Hopper could make a grab for the guard that was holding Joyce as she screamed disgusted insults at Brenner, two guards had pounced on him, restraining him. Brenner had stood up and looked at Joyce, a crazed anger in his face.

"Take her to the surgery."

“No!” Joyce screamed in unison with Hopper. Hopper struggled against the guards who now had him pinned up against the wall. He was screaming after Joyce, who was kicking and contesting against the grip of the guard who was now pulling her along the hallway.

Hopper managed to get a hand free and reached out to Joyce who, in amongst her grappling, was reaching out to him too. But they were too far out of each other’s grasp and Joyce’s eyes met his in horror of knowing what was going to happen next. Before the guard gave one last tug on her body that would cause her to move along, she looked deep into Hopper’s eyes.

He was crying now in desperation, clawing his way through the unrelenting guards trying to get to her. But she stopped struggling for one second as she looked at him.

“Save them, Hop,” was the last thing she said to him before the guard hauled her away.

As they disappeared around the corner, all Hopper could do was scream her name over and over again.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

I'M SO SORRY I DIDN'T UPDATE SOONER, please forgive me!

and @starmaammke, please accept this short update as a much belated birthday present! Enjoy!

Hopper was sitting in the room they had thrown him in, alone and sobbing. His head in his hands, gasping desperately for air as his lungs tightened amidst his tears. He had failed. He couldn't save Joyce, and now she was as good as dead. The grief flowed through his veins like fire, burning and paining him in a way he hadn't felt since Sara. The black hole had gotten her, it had destroyed his marriage and now it had taken Joyce too. His fingers went to his hair, tugging with a force that should've hurt him but he was too overcome with anguish that he didn't even feel a twinge.

Although there was a strong chance Joyce would live, she would never be the same. A mindless vessel, unable to talk or move. Never again would Hopper feel the rush of warmth when she answered the door to him with a heart stopping smile. He would never again laugh at her wit and charm as they shared cigarettes at her kitchen table, be it in the middle of the day or the middle of the night. He would never hear her breathlessly whisper his name in the throes of passion. Never again feel her hands rake through his hair whenever she held him to her chest, comforting him with soothing words and touches on the nights where the hurt inside him became too much.

And then his mind went to Jonathan. He still had a chance to save Will, he knew that. But what would he say to Jonathan when he returned home with his mother in a permanent catatonic state. He let out a gut wrenching cry when he imagined Joyce's sons' faces when they saw her. What kind of life would they have now? Their mother had always been there for them, supported them more than anyone, believed in them, encouraged them, comforted them. She did anything for her sons. Who would be there for them now?

Hopper knew that he would need to step up, take care of her kids, take care of her. But the selfish part within him, the part that felt his heart constrict every time he even remotely pictured Joyce in a similar state to Terry Ives, made him wonder if he really could. Could he really stand to look at Joyce, to look at her sons, knowing that this was his fault? That if he hadn't left that night, maybe the boys would still have their mom, that Joyce would still be Joyce. Would he shut them out, the same way he and Diane had done to each other after Sara, eventually just destroying that part of his life and running away? But then a thought even more daunting came across him. The thought of Joyce, alone and scared in her mind, internally crying out for him to help her, to be there for her children. The thought of Joyce's unfeeling face, glassy eyes not looking at him directly, but if he got close enough he would be able to see the desperation behind her blank gaze.

He knew then that he could never leave her then. He could never leave her boys.

His mind went to Jane then. The girl he had been reluctant at first to take under his wing, the girl who had slowly become the daughter he never knew he would have again. He thought of her, frightened and alone, trapped in some room, wondering where her Dad was. He lifted his head then and stopped crying with a sniff. He took a deep breath, staring up at the door in front of him. His job here was not done. He rose to his feet, his eyes narrowed. He was no longer grieving, no longer crying. Now he was just angry. Angry at the men who had taken Joyce from him, and now threatened to take the final shred of light in his life.

His jaw clenched and his fingers curled into tight fists at his sides, his nails furiously digging into his palms. He walked over to the door, only to find it locked yet again. With a huff of anger, he backed up from the door, taking a large stride toward it before kicking the door right next to the handle with all his might. The door budged, coming off the hinges ever so slightly. It took three more attempts before the door finally shifted enough for him to slam his side into the door to fully open it.

One of the guards had heard the commotion and ran to the hallway and aimed his gun at Hopper. Hopper simply looked at him, rage

written all over his expression and it was enough to make the man with the gun tremble ever so slightly, unsure of how to react to him. And when Hopper stood there, just staring him down, unrelenting, the man wondered what to do. He ended up taking too long to think, he went to go speak into his walkie strapped to his shoulder when Hopper took two quick strides toward him and struck him across the face with a right hook.

The man fell to the ground after the impact of one punch, but Hopper didn't stop. He clambered on top of him, not even hesitating as he pummelled him with a further five hits before eventually recoiling. The man had been successfully about three punches ago, so Hopper moved off of him with a sigh, taking his gun with him in the process as well as his walkie. With a sniff, he rubbed his face with his hand before he trudged down the hall.

The black hole had taken Joyce, and he'd be damned if he let took Jane too.

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"Eleven, let's go," Brenner was insisting, holding his hand out to the child in front of him.

Jane stood there defiantly, staring down the lanky, now disfigured man. The man who filled her with so much fear and dread, she knew she couldn't let him see that in her anymore.

"No," she told him 'no' the same we she had told those mouthbreathers who tried to hurt Mike and Dustin to go. It was her finest attempt at sounding threatening that she could muster, and judging by the way those boys ran away she knew it would work.

But Brenner did not look fearful, rather inconvenienced by her unmoving stance. He had Joyce Byers, he had Chief Hopper locked away, and while the boy had ran away, it would not be long until he was found. He had everything he needed and now it was time to go. And yet she did not do as he said. He didn't want to have to threaten her in an effort to get her to go with him, but he was growing desperate now. He had heard the phone call the Chief had had with Doctor Owens. And while their research had moved to Manhattan, he

knew that Owens still had the man power that could potentially overthrow Brenner's entire operation. And if Owens had taken Hopper's call even remotely serious, it meant that they were most likely on their way.

"I have already told you what will happen if--"

"I want to see them," Jane stated bluntly. Brenner's face was a picture when the confusion came over him. "I want to know they are safe. If they are safe, we will go." She scowled at him, the rage in her eyes put him at ease at the thought of the blood in her nose that threatened to fall if he did not agree to what she demanded.

Instead, he composed himself, wondering when the hell the child became so strategic, and gave her his best attempt at a warm smile. "Of course, child." He bent his head to her as he exited the room.

The smile immediately fell from his face to that of a frown when he closed the door behind him. He marched to the guard opposite him who had been tasked with following Brenner for protection. With a sigh, Brenner whispered quietly.

"Get me Joyce and Will Byers, bring them to me," he said urgently. Time was really not his friend at this moment.

The guard shifted uncomfortably and his eyes darted from side to side. Brenner could see the reluctance in him as he struggled to find an answer. He began to dread to whatever was about to come out of the man's mouth.

"There's been a problem," was the best way he could put it.

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Will had been locked in the darkened room for what must have been hours now. His small hands gripped tight round the barrel of the shotgun Hopper had provided, awaiting the oncoming danger. But the danger had not come yet. Nevertheless, he remained prepared. His gaze unwavering from the door, ready for anyone or anything that threatened to come down. The fear was still present within him as he waited with shuddering breath, yet he was determined to be

brave like Hopper had told him to be.

You're stronger than you know, Will.

The words had been on a loop since he heard Hopper fire the gunshot, comforting him ever so slightly. The words rang even louder in his head when he heard voices turn into the hallway.

"Get off me, you son of bitch! Let me go you fucker!" the desperate profanities of his mother's cries made Will flinch and every muscle in his body was suddenly on high alert. He found himself rising to his feet, dropping the gun and rushing over to the door, pressing his ear up against it as the shouting got louder.

"I won't let you do this, you can't do this, please!" Joyce's voice was frenzied and shrill and he could hear in her tone that she was struggling against something. And when he heard a man grunt in amongst her cries, Will's eyes widened.

"Shut up bitch!" the cries stopped just as they passed the door. The sudden sound of a pained yelp courtesy of his mother made him withdraw from the door with a sharp gasp.

Will was shaking. His mother was in trouble, possibly hurt. Memories began to play in his head, memories of Joyce making that same noise. He had heard it before, multiple times as a kid when his father would stumble home drunk, yelling and screaming at him and Jonathan. Joyce had always stepped between Lonnie and her kids, that always resulted in whatever rage Lonnie had pinned at his sons being directed right at Joyce, who he then would smack across the face. Joyce had always made that noise then.

But she had only flinched away for a moment, before taking a deep breath and facing Lonnie head on, not letting him within an inch of the boys. It had always been that way, Joyce putting herself aside in order to protect her sons. Even with Lonnie out of the picture, she seemed to have been doing it a lot more often over the course of the last year and a half. Putting herself between danger and Will in the hopes of saving her son.

And when Will heard the footsteps begin to descend further down the

hall, he realised that now it was time for him to do the same for her.

With a deep breath, his hand went to the lock. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment when he pulled on the lock and opened the door. Reaching behind him he grabbed the shotgun, and with hesitant footsteps he walked out into the hall.

His mother was currently thrashing in the arms of a man wearing a brown suit jacket, his feet planted in the ground trying to use his weight to pull Joyce along. She was yelling inaudible words of spite in his direction, trying desperately to kick at his legs to get free. Will felt the fear come over him then as he watched his mom fight against the man, almost aimlessly. But instead of succumbing to it, he instead swallowed down his fear and with trembling hands he raised the gun at the man.

“L-let her g-g-g-o,” he stuttered, his voice still too quiet for either of them to hear over Joyce’s screaming. When the man finally managed to move Joyce up the hall, Joyce let out a strangled yelp again as he tightly wrapped his arms around her middle, squeezing hard enough to knock the wind out of her. Will felt an anger in him he had never felt before, a desperate determination to put a stop to his mother’s suffering.

“Let her go!” Will screamed this time, hot tears of distress clouding his eyes as he held the gun in shaking hands.

The man and Joyce both froze, the man’s eyes finally coming up to meet Will’s. His jaw dropped as he stared at the small boy with the large shotgun in his hands, aimed directly at him. He stared in complete bewilderment and opened his mouth to do speak. As he did, however, Joyce thought fast and threw her head back, bashing the man’s nose. He let out a cry and immediately recoiled from her, his arms letting her go.

It was then that Joyce brought her foot up and kicked him where a man should never be kicked. But the way she saw it this was no man, just another mindless soldier intent on destroying her life. He hunched over, but as he bent down Joyce brought up her knee only to hit him in the nose once again. The force of the hit sent him backwards, collapsing on the ground and dropping his gun in the

process. She kicked it to the other side of the hall. When the man held his hand out to reach for it, Joyce stomped on his hand, breaking a couple of his fingers in the first place.

When Lonnie had threatened to come back into their lives after everything, a tired-of-being-terrified Joyce had taken up some self-defence classes at the YWCA. After a couple of session she'd thought she was being ridiculous, Lonnie wouldn't come back and figured she was wasting her time. But in that moment it had come back to her, and while not a lot of what she just did to the man was 'self-defence' per say, but damn did it feel good.

Joyce grabbed his gun before smacking him across the head with the gun, hard enough to make him close his eyes and appear unresponsive, but still breathing. Panting, exhausted and struggling to get her breathing back on track, she turned then to her son, who had now lowered the shotgun and was looking her with baited breath. She felt tears of joy spring to her eyes then. She rushed to him then, quickly crouching to his height and pulling him into her arms with a tight embrace.

A happiness Joyce thought she may never feel again hit her like a train, her heart beating so fast she thought for a moment she was going to pass out. As he cried into her shoulder, she cried too, soothing his hair with her hand. She took a second to turn her head to the side and smell him, to bask in the comforting aroma of crayons and forest, the scent of her son. She let out a relieved cry as she felt him tightened his arms around her and shake against her.

Afraid they may be in more trouble yet, she held Will at arm's length and inspected him for any cuts or bruises. He didn't appear to have a scratch on him, but that still didn't stop Joyce from asking.

"Are you hurt, sweetie?"

Will didn't answer but she knew the answer was most likely no. Instead his pupils dilated and eyes widened when he caught sight of the bruise on Joyce's cheek. He lifted a finger to point at it, causing Joyce to raise her hand to cover it. She gave him a kind smile to reassure him.

"It's okay, I'm not hurt," she whispered and rested her forehead against his for a moment, closing her eyes as she said a silent prayer of thanks for having found her boy. "Come on, I need to get you out of here." She stood up to her normal height then and grabbed Will's hand.

She had began to lead him away but he didn't budge, instead he only pulled her back.

"But Mom, what about Jane? What about Hopper?" Will's eyes were full of worry and urgency, his mouth hung open slightly with anxiety.

Joyce looked at him with sheer determination. She had no plans of abandoning Hopper, not now, and after tonight, not ever. But right now she had to get her son far away from this damned place. "I'm going to come back for them, but I need to get you out of here," she said with as much understanding as she could but her tone evident with hurry.

"Mom, there's no time," Will exclaimed with a desperate nervousness. When Joyce gave him a questioning look, he sighed sadly. "Before I ran away, I heard the guards talking. They said the plan is to be gone from here by one," he lifted his watch to Joyce, bringing it to her eyeline. "That's in just over thirty minutes. Even if you did take me away from here and came back, it would too late."

Joyce let out a stressed sigh as she ran her hand through her hair. She tried to think through her options. She could stay at the lab, find Hopper and Jane, but risk Will getting hurt. Or she could take Will to safety, and risk losing Hopper and Jane forever. She cursed internally. She wanted to get the hell out of this place, run away and never come back. But the thought of Jane going back to those monsters came across her and she felt her heart sink. And then she thought of a life without her, a life without Jim Hopper, and that was too much to bare. She looked at her son then.

"Okay, I need you to get back in that clo--"

"No, Mom. I'm not locking myself back in there," Will shook his head calmly but looked up at her with a purposeful gaze. "I'm going to help you get them out of here."

“Will I can’t-“

“Jane is a party member. She is my friend, hell, she’s more like a sister. And Hopper,” Will looked away from her, almost embarrassed for a brief moment. “He’s more of a Dad to me than Lonnie ever was.” Joyce felt her chest tighten and fresh tears spring to her eyes. She couldn’t help the gasp of a sob that threatened to escape her mouth. Joyce had always wondered what Will had thought of Hopper, but she never sat him down to actually ask him, worried it may look too suspicious. She knew that Will didn’t have a problem with him, if that were the case Will would have said something to her long before now.

But to hear Will refer to Hopper as a father figure, something she knew he had searched aimlessly for most of his life, made her heart swell with a joy she couldn’t quite explained.

“They’ve both saved me, time and time again. Maybe it’s about time I save them, too,” Will shrugged, a sheepish smile on his face that reminded her far too much of Jonathan.

Joyce looked at the ground then back at her son. For the first time in her life, she didn’t see a quiet, timid little boy looking back at her. This time she saw a young man, with a still gaze of tenacity she had never seen from him before.

“When did you get so brave?” she let a tear slip then, accompanied with a proud yet tired smile.

Will returned the smile. Despite the fact that Joyce was starting to only just beginning to come to grips that her youngest son was actually growing up, she couldn’t help herself as she combed the hair from his forehead before planting a kiss there. She inhaled the smell of him one last time before pulling away. She backed up to retrieve the gun she had dropped on her way to hug Will. She checked the safety and clicked it off, as she had watched her father do with his firearms when she was younger.

Will picked up the shotgun and Joyce immediately took it out of his hands and wrapped the strap around her middle, flashing Will a ‘think again, mister’ look as she did so. Will had rolled his eyes

jokingly at that. And just like that, the mother and son descended down the hall in search of their family.

Notes for the Chapter:

I wasn't going to end this here, but I'm tired and I really wanted to update this for you! Apologies for the lack of Jopper in this chapter, but I'm the devil and I want Hopper to suffer just a little longer thinking that Joyce is gone ￣(ツ)￣

next chapter will most likely be the penultimate chapter so except shit to go in a very downward direction.

5. Chapter 5

Summary for the Chapter:

Hopper searches for Jane and Will, Brenner takes things into his own hands.

Hopper was intent in his search down the hallway when the alarm went off. He jumped as it sounded, the noise just about bursting his eardrums at first. He was immediately reminded of the last time he had been there. It was the same alarm that had sounded when those things attacked the facility, it signalled for evacuation. Now he was unsure as to why it was being sounded. That was until he heard the banging of a door opening causing him to hide in the doorway to the left of him.

“What the fuck is with the alarms?!” a man strode down the hall, throwing his arms in the air in confusion. Hopper peaked his head round and saw that he was jogging behind another man who was walking away with a purpose. After the first man’s exclamation, the man in front spun round on his heel.

“The god damn military is here, Walker! We need to leave *now*,” the man hissed before striding away. Hopper flinched and sunk further into the door way when ‘Walker’ stopped just after his hiding place.

“But why aren’t we going through the east wing?! This is the slowest way out of here!” Walker insisted, yelling after the first man.

The man in front let out a groan of frustration. “Because that little *freak* is going fucking psycho! Do you not remember what happened at the school? I am not going through the East Wing just to have that kid explode my brain or whatever psychic bullshit she can do!” The man screamed back at Walker and continued down the hall.

This time Walker didn’t hesitate and ran after the man with a feared gasp.

When Hopper heard the sound of the doors at the opposing end of the hall, he edged around and checked he was in the clear. When he

saw that there was nothing there, he headed down the corridor towards the east wing.

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"I want to see *them*!" Jane hissed as she slammed her fists on the metal desk to her right. The lights were flickering frantically as she tried to control her anger. She knew the deal, don't hurt Papa and they won't hurt her family. But so far, she had had no proof that her family was safe, and she was beginning to lose it.

Brenner stood there, his eerily calm demeanour seemed to be fading. His eyes looked more urgently as he stared at Jane with a pleading gaze. He had received word that Owens and his men were in a three-mile radius and the threat was more imminent than ever. He needed to leave now. But he was *not* leaving without the girl.

"And you will, child, but right now we need to leave," Brenner extended his hand to Jane. She took note of the desperation in his voice but then ignored it on account of the rage building inside of her.

"No! I am not leaving without my *family*," Jane huffed at him, taking a deep breath to stop tears running down her face.

Brenner crouched down in front of her. "Eleven they are *not* your family!" he put his hands on her shoulders and shook her, his tone laced with an annoyance she had only heard a handful of times in her life. It hit her like a knife through the heart. "I am the only family you have ever had, the only family you will ever have! These people are scared of you, that's the only reason they treat you well, because they don't understand you and they *fear* you. They think you will *hurt* them so they pretend to love you. It's not real," he said the last part softly, bringing a hand to her cheek, catching a tear that had fallen from her eyes as she panted with concealed sadness.

He gave her a small smile of attempted reassurance and tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear before he stood up and composed himself, his hands clasped together behind his back. When she looked up at him, she saw the face of a man who thought he had won.

"Fuck you," she spat at him. Dad wasn't here to yell at her so she figured she would give it a go, feeling it was the only way she could express the rage at the lies he had spoken to her. Her eyes were slits as she glared up at him, jaw clenched, hands in fists at her sides. When she saw the horror in his eyes, for a moment she felt pretty damn smug.

That was until he brought a hand round from his back and smacked her across the face.

She tried to keep her feet planted in place but the unrelenting force behind the slap made her wobble ever so slightly as her head whipped round. When she looked back at Brenner, bringing a hand to her now stinging cheek, he was looking at her with wrath she had not seen, his eyes wild and his hair slightly out of place, nostrils flaring and red cheeked. She expected him to bring a hand to her again, but when he didn't she looked at his hands then. She then noticed the syringe in his hands.

This time she didn't keep her rage suppressed. The prick of his hand on her cheek still vibrated with irritation, and she channelled it to throw him up against the wall with a wave of her hand and a scream of outrage. She pinned him there with such force it caused cracks to form on the wall. She chose not to watch with delight as her captor struggled against the invisible force that was holding him there. Instead she stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her and locking it from the outside.

When the guards outside of the room caught sight of her they immediately raised their weapons. She stared them down as they suddenly let go off their guns as she telekinetically ripped them from their hands. She levitated them, aiming them directly back at them. When she cocked the guns in unison, they fearfully raised their hands and gawked at her in panicked terror.

"Go," she demanded and felt a small smile tug at her lips as they both let out a yelp before sprinting down the hall.

At the sound of the alarm going off, Jane looked over her shoulder to see many of the other guards running towards the exit, rather than down the hall toward her. With a deep breath, she let the guns fall to

the ground and wiped the blood that was now trickling down her nose. She then ventured down the hall to find her family.

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Hopper was beginning to grow aggravated as he searched the east wing for what felt like forever. He had encountered three guards who he successfully managed to punch into unconsciousness but now his knuckles were red raw and trembling like crazy. He had tried to keep the anger away, tried to stay somewhat calm as he searched. But when he turned the corner and found that he had now gone full circle, he felt all the control wash out of him. And he caught sight of group of blood drops on the ground he lost it.

He leaned up against the wall for support before sinking to the floor in defeat. It was all too overwhelming and he felt the air rush out of his lungs the same way it when Sara flatlined. The entire world around him seemed to be ripping apart as he let his mind picture Joyce lying on the table as the electrocuted the mind out of her. He couldn't believe that the black hole had taken her too.

It wasn't as though Joyce had been a woman he had met and fell for over the past year and a half. He had known Joyce since he was four, when he had accidentally pushed her in the park, being the oversized, clumsy kid that he was and her being the tiny, little girl that she was. He remembered how Joyce had cried and Hopper had apologised over and over again. It wasn't until her mother had come over and assured Joyce that it had been an accident. He'd had a crush on her ever since, the entirety of their adolescent lives. And despite them growing apart after high school, what with Joyce marrying Lonnie and Hopper moving to New York, he still thought of her often.

That was until Diane had come into his life and everything was sunshine and rainbows for a short while and he found himself forgetting about most of his life before Diane and Sara. And then Sara had died, and Hopper had found that the first person he'd wanted to see was Joyce. He'd wanted it to be Joyce that was there to hold his hand, look up at him with those big brown eyes and tell him everything was going to be alright, maybe even crack a crude joke like she did in uncomfortable moments when they were teenagers. But then he'd come home, seen her walking around town with two

young boys and knew his time had been and passed.

Which was why he'd felt like god was smiling down at him that night Joyce had kissed him. They had been arguing, something stupid and meaningless when Hopper's feelings had come out and Joyce had reached up and kissed him, silently reciprocating his feelings. It had turned out that their time hadn't been when they were kids, fumbling around in the back of his truck and yelling at each other about Lonnie Byers and Chrissy Carpenter, it had been now. When they had grown, they had suffered, yet despite their separate hells they had come back to each other. And Hopper had been happy.

And now as he cried into his hands, he realised that should've been the first indicator that everything was about to be snatched away from him. He let out a loud sob as he struggled to breathe, then wondering to himself why he even bothered. Joyce was gone. She wasn't coming back. And so Hopper cried for the woman he-

Hopper took in a shaky breath as he realised.

The woman he loved.

He put his head in his hands. It had taken this. After high school, after Lonnie, after all the times he had lost her, it taken him finally losing her for good to realise that he loved her. He was honest to god in love with her and now it was too late. He chest tightened as he let out a scream. He was crumbling. He was breaking.

"Dad?" it was the softest voice he had ever heard that made him bring his head up. The great weight on his chest seemed to lift when he met the eyes of a cautious and trembling child.

"Jane," he let out a deep breath with a heavy sigh. His entire face softened and an odd sense of relief washed over him as she stepped toward him. There was a confusion on her face, as though she was unsure this was a good time to approach him. When her small hand rested on his, crouching to his height on the floor and looking up at him with large, knowing eyes he looked at her and felt tears rushing back to him.

He pulled her into a tight embrace, a mix of happiness and sorrow

came over him and all he could was cry into the child's shoulder. Jane cried too, he assumed out of relief for finally being reunited with him. Hopper mumbled apology after apology that Jane silenced by wrapping her arms around his neck and telling him it was all okay.

He resisted the urge to tell her that it wasn't, that things were never going to be okay again.

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When the door finally opened, Brenner stormed out of the room. He had spent a good part of twenty minutes banging on the door, calling out for someone to let him out. It taken one guard to finally stop running from the exit to hear his cries and coming running to his aide. It had taken him a few attempts before he finally managed to unlock the door. He now stepping aside, standing to full attention as his superior walked out with a less-than-pleased expression.

"Where's the girl?" Brenner asked the guard, choosing instead to fix his suit jacket rather than look at the man who had come to his rescue.

"We haven't been able to locate her," the guard said honestly after staring at the ground for a moment in an awkward stance. "But sir, the authorities are here. We can't stay here we have to go!"

Brenner turned to the man with rage in his eyes. "We are not leaving without the girl, or the boy. Alert your colleagues, tell them to stop the evacuation and concentrate all efforts to finding her."

The guard furrowed his brows in stark bewilderment. "Sir, with all due respect, if any of us want to get away from here without getting arrested, or even killed, we need to go now. Once we are away we can regroup and we can find them again."

Brenner took a deep breath through his nostrils before he appeared calm again. His small smile of mock reassurance spread across his lips as he turned to the guard again, the expression on his face seemed to relax him. Brenner glanced down at his service weapon then. "Say, son, can I see that for a moment please?" he asked innocently.

“Sir?”

“The gun, please, if you wouldn’t mind?”

The guard gave Brenner a questioning look but nevertheless reached into his holster and hesitantly pulled the gun out and hesitantly handed it to Brenner. He was right to be hesitant, because right after Brenner took a moment to inspect the weapon before lifting his arm and aiming it right at the guards chest and pulling the trigger.

The man flew backward and landed on the ground in a heap. Brenner once again lifted the gun into his eye view with a ‘hmpf’, impressed by the force behind the relatively small piece of weaponry. He then turned on his heel and walked down the hall. If his guards weren’t going to find the children, he would find them himself.

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Once Hopper had established that Jane wasn’t hurt, save for a cut on her lip from Brenner slapping her across her face that filled his gut with rage, they continued heading through the facility to search for Will. He tried his hardest again not to break down at the thought of looking for Joyce, most likely comatose on a stretcher somewhere in the building. He knew that Will had to be his priority now, knowing that Joyce would want him to find her son. A sad smirk came upon him thinking of Joyce’s reaction if she thought for a moment that Hopper had put her needs before Will, how she would go off at him, yelling at him for being an idiot. It was wiped from his face when he remembered that never again would he be the brunt of Joyce’s anger, something he never thought he might one day miss.

Hopper and Jane had been walking and looking through rooms in silence. She had offered to try and use her abilities to find Will, but he had told her to save her strength, unaware of the dangers they may face on their way to find the boy. They had just finished checking the last door of a hallway before turning left when Jane finally dared to ask him.

“Why were you crying?” she asked without looking at him, keeping her eyes pinned straight ahead.

The question had taken Hopper off guard. "What?"

"You were crying, *screaming*. I've never heard you make that noise before. What's wrong?"

Hopper stopped walking for a moment. When they had been reunited, Hopper couldn't find it within himself to tell Jane what had happened to Joyce. She had already lost one mother to Brenner's cruel punishment, how the hell was he supposed to tell her she had lost another the exact same way? He was certain it would break her almost as much as it had broken Hopper. He didn't want to picture her face when he told her, let alone see it in the flesh.

"Nothing, kid, I was just scared, s'all," he grumbled before he continued walking.

Jane looked up at him with knotted brows, unconvinced. "Friends don't lie," she stated accusingly.

Hopper scoffed as he peered into a room that appeared to be deserted. "Yeah, well, I'm not your friend anymore, am I? You saw the birth certificate, I'm your old man now, I don't have to tell you everything," he brushed it off as he continued walking.

As predicted, his response was not enough for Jane. She stopped walking and glared at him. "Hopper, what *happened*?" she hissed angrily.

Hopper spun on his heel. "Oh, okay, you real name-ing me now?" his eyebrows raised at her, flashing her a threatening look that did nothing but increase Jane's scowl. "Look, kid, it's been a rough as hell night, let's just find Will and then we can talk, alright?"

Her face seemed to soften when she picked up on his missed detail. "Where's Joyce?" the anger was gone from her voice, her tone now more perplexed than anything.

His jaw clenched as he bit back tears, Jane's question piercing through him like a knife. His throat closed up and he looked away from her, squeezing his eyes closed, fighting back the sadness and heartache that threatened to escape him.

“Dad,” she called out to him, but when his eyes still refused to meet hers, worry seeped through her veins. “Where is *Joyce*?!” she yelled at him, finally bringing his gaze to her. When she saw the glassy look in his eyes, her eyes began to water. She now wasn’t sure if she wanted to hear the answer to his question.

Running his hand through his hair and then down his face with a heavy sigh, he walked over to Jane and onto his knees so he was now in her eye line. He put his hands on both her shoulders and tried not to break just at the pure sight of worry and dread on Jane’s face. He took a deep breath and looked at the ground. “Listen, kid, uh. I really don’t know how to tell you-“

“Joyce,” Jane interrupted with a gasp.

He shut his eyes again. “Yeah, kid, Joyce she-“

“No, Dad,” when Jane shook his shoulder urgently he brought his eyes up to meet hers. Only her gaze wasn’t on him anymore, it was fixed behind him. “Joyce,” she nodded her head and took a step to the side.

Hopper felt like he couldn’t move, but forced himself to anyway. He slowly turned his head over his shoulder and felt his knees give way. He let go of Jane who was now running down the hall.

Right towards Joyce and Will.

It was a dream, it had to be, that was the best conclusion Hopper could bring himself to. There was no way Joyce was standing there, next to Will, her face lighting up with sheer joy as Jane through herself into Joyce’s waiting arms. She was there. She was smiling. She was talking. She was squeezing the life out of the young girl in her arms. She was Joyce.

Hopper didn’t blink. He felt completely weightless as he pulled himself up to his feet, once again feeling like the ground was about to shatter beneath him. He couldn’t believe it, as much as he wanted to believe that it really was Joyce standing in front of him, letting Jane go so she could hug Will, he simply couldn’t. But then she looked up from across the way and met his eyes. Hopper felt like the wind had

been knocked out of him and all he could do was stare. All he could do was stare at Joyce's watering eyes and the nervous smile on her face, the colour in her cheeks growing as she looked at him.

"Hey, Hop," she said in a voice he barely heard but it rung through his ears and directly to his heart as though it was the sweetest melody he'd ever heard.

When he could finally bring himself to speak, it came out in a strangled, quiet voice. "Say that again."

Joyce let out a tiny laugh as a tear escaped her. "Hey, Hop."

And then he was running. He was sprinting to her. She was already crying by the time he reached her. He immediately wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly to him and hoisting her off of the ground. She wrapped her legs around his middle instinctively and clung to him like he was the last breath she had left in this world. He buried his face in the nape of her neck, smelling her, bathing in all of her.

She was here. She was in his arms. He could hear his heart in his ears as it beat harder than a drum. He didn't want to let go. He never wanted to let go of her again. His hand moved up to cradle the back of her neck as she cried into the crook of his neck. He tried his hardest to control his breathing as he felt as though the heart of him was about to burst out of his chest, his eyes still wide in disbelief.

"Hopper, Hopper, Hopper..." she whispered his name over and over again, as though she needed to remind herself who it was she was holding, as if she too was trying to convince herself that this was in fact real.

He gently placed her down in front of him, keeping a hand on her shoulder and another on her cheek, crouching to her height. He inspected her face, once again making sure that it really was her. He tucked her hair behind her ears, showcasing those hypnotic chocolate orbs that made him so weak. They glistened up at him, shining in amongst her tears and Hopper felt overwhelmingly captivated by her.

"I thought, I, I thought I..." he trailed off, eventually making no sense

whatsoever as he scanned her face.

She smiled a little at him, then raised her hand to his face, gently cupping his face. "I know, Hop," her eyes bore into his, knowingly. "Me too."

Before he could allow the sadness to etch its way back into her expression, he brought his lips to her forehead in a firm kiss. Joyce let out a delightful gasp than transpired into a small laugh when Hopper began to kiss her cheeks, nose and basically everywhere apart from her lips. Before he could, he realised just how much he missed the feel of her in those moments and pulled her back to him instantly, resting his head on top of her head.

He took in a deep breath, never wanting the moment to end. Joyce wasn't gone, the black hole hadn't taken her, she was here, in his arms. And when Jane and Will came to them both and wrapped their arms around the pair, Hopper truly felt at home.

Notes for the Chapter:

thought I'd be nice and not leave y'all with a total cliffhanger! Hope you enjoyed this chapter, see ya next time for the final chapter!

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

The final showdown.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am so sorry this took so long, but this chapter ended up being so much longer than I anticipated! I hope you enjoy the final chapter, and I fully apologise in advanced for what is sure to be a parade of grammar mistakes, oops.

At the sound of gunfire, the Byers/Hopper reunion was short lived. Picking up Joyce's discarded shotgun, Hopper rushed them down the hall, running out of the hall and down the stairs. While there were no other shots, Hopper was more than aware of the danger they faced. Jane had told him she had Brenner locked away, but there was a large possibility that he could have been let out. And going by what Jane had said, he wasn't exactly pleased.

When they got to the ground floor, Hopper sighed with relief to find that it was empty. He led them to the fire door, checking to see it was unlocked. When the door clicked open, the warm summer evening air hit him as though it was the first breath he had taken in a long time. But he knew that he couldn't stop now, he couldn't stop to relax just yet.

"Alright," Hopper dipped his hand into his pocket, rummaging for his keys. When he pulled them from his pocket, he grabbed Joyce's hand and placed them in her palm. "My car is about three hundred yards west, under the big oak tree, you can't miss it. You and Will get in and drive to—"

"Wait, wait, wait *what?*" Joyce cut him off abruptly shaking her head and holding her free hand up to him. She looked between him and Jane. "What about you and Jane?"

Hopper looked down at Jane who returned his gaze with a confident

nod, reassuring him.

“We’re staying here,” Hopper said with a deep breath, anticipating Joyce’s outburst.

Joyce’s eyes widened before her face twisted into panicked confusion. “What the hell, why would you do that?!” she glanced between the two of them.

Hopper sighed. He looked away from Joyce, turning his eyes to the floor. “Brenner can’t get away,” he looked up at her then and tried not to react to the desperation and astonishment on her face. “We have to make sure he doesn’t get away. We have to finish this.”

Joyce brought the back of her hand to her forehead and let out an exasperated breath. “What do you mean ‘finish this’? We have finished this, you said it yourself we’re about three hundred yards from your car then we can go home!” she put her hands on Hopper’s arms, pleading with him.

“We can’t go home. Not if he’s still out there. So long as he’s still out there, we can never go home, Joyce,” Hopper tried to explain to her quickly. Time wasn’t their friend at this point.

She blinked at him then turned her face away and let go off him. She paced away from him for a moment, then looked at Will. Hopper was right. So long as Brenner was out in the world, her family would never be safe. They would be hunted, and even if they weren’t, there would still be the constant fear looming over them that one day they would need to relive the hell that had been this night. And maybe no one would be there to help them get away this time. Hopper was right, of course he was right. At least if Brenner was locked away, they would know he couldn’t come after them anymore.

She walked back over to Hopper, nodding as she agreed with him and came to a conclusion. “Okay, yes, you’re right,” she continued to nod, biting on her thumbnail for a moment. She turned to Will and hung the keys in front of her. “Will, when you get to Hopper’s ca-“

“Woah, wait hold on, you’re not coming with us,” Hopper held a hand up between Joyce and Will, turning to her with a stern

expression.

Joyce shook her head, bewilderment in her face as she raised her eyebrows at him. "Of course I am, what are you crazy? You think I'm just going to let you walk back in there on your own, like hell I am!" she scoffed at him, turning to face him fully.

"I'm not alone, I have Jane with-"

"All the more reason for me to come with you." She crossed her arms defiantly, trying her best to stare him down despite being a foot shorter than him.

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "I'm asking you to stay with Will and get yourselves to safety," he tried to keep control of his voice, his words coming out through his teeth.

"And I'm telling you no, I'm in this with you!" she almost yelled up at him, throwing her arms in the air.

"I have to do this alone," he hissed at her in an attempt to dissuade the determined scowl on her face. But it didn't falter, instead it only added to her own resolve as she glared up at him.

"What is this, just some big Chief Hopper hero bullshit?!" she yelled this time, pressing him and prodding his chest with her finger.

"No, I-"

"Some batshit crazy way for you to prove yourself?!"

"No, Joyce-"

"Then what Hopper?! Why in the fuck are you so determined to do this alone? Why won't you just let me fucking help y-"

"BECAUSE I CAN'T LOSE YOU AGAIN!" he roared at her, crouching to her eye line and tightly grasping her arms. Everyone was silent. Out of his eye line, Will and Jane looked at each other in shock at Jim's outburst. The fury in Joyce's eyes seemed to dissipate as she looked up at him in slight confusion.

“What?” she asked him quietly, trying to grasp what he meant.

Hopper sighed and tore his eyes away from her, squeezing his eyes shut as he dipped his head, taking a deep breath as he tried to reign in the overflow of emotions coursing through him.

“I already thought I lost you tonight,” he sighed, shaking his head lightly. “I can’t go through that again, Joyce I can’t do it.”

Joyce’s face completely softened and her heart chest tightened. She saw then on Hopper’s face the extent of the trauma he had been through that night. She had been so preoccupied with trying to get away from the men who were trying to hurt her, reuniting with Will and finding Hopper and Jane, she hadn’t had the chance to face the fact that there had been a good chance she would never see Hopper again. But up until five minutes ago, Hopper had truly believed that he had lost her. While she had felt the relief in his embrace when he saw her, she was only now seeing the scars it had left on his mind. He looked broken at the thought of it, like he was reliving the pain of thinking he had lost her all over again.

She leaned up slightly then and pressed her forehead against his. She then brought herself up to her tiptoes, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissed him. It wasn’t like the kiss they had shared previously that night, this wasn’t a soft kiss full of sadness and uncertain promises. No, this kiss was harder as he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her against him for a brief moment. This kiss was full of reassurance, of strength, understanding and something else that they could only describe as love.

When he pulled away, suddenly very aware of the two sets of big brown eyes looking at the pair of them, he looked deep into Joyce’s eyes to find that she was looking back at him with unwavering resilience in her gaze.

“You won’t lose me,” she smiled at him softly as he placed her back down on the ground.

He couldn’t help but smile back at her. He brought his hand to her face, pushing the disarrayed hair from her eyes and cupping her cheeks. His eyes bore into hers, pale blue shining into chocolate

brown, neither blinking, just purely indulging in each other for a single moment amongst the hellfire that was about to come down on them. It was a simple moment, one that Hopper wish could last so much longer.

Because right now, the way Joyce was looking at him, made him want to grab her close to him, push open that door and run with her and their kids, run far away and for the rest of their lives if they had do. When she looked at him like that, he wanted to risk everything so that she would continue to look at him with those eyes for as long as she could.

“I love you,” he murmured, his eyes not leaving hers. He didn’t take the moment to revel in the way her eyes widened at his confession to her. “And I’m sorry.”

“Wha- what?”

In an instant, Hopper wrapped his arms tightly around her and lifted her. He kicked the fire door open, in amongst Will and Joyce’s shouts of protest. He gently threw her out into the night air, Jane having given Will a small push out of the door. When he was certain they were a good distance outside he quickly backtracked and pulled the door closed behind him.

It took Joyce a moment to understand what had just happened, and when she did she abruptly turned back toward the door, trying her best to somehow open it without any presence of a handle. She banged on the window as Hopper looked at her with remorseful eyes and a sullen frown.

“You can’t do this, Hopper!” she yelled as she continued to bang on the glass.

Hopper bit back the sob that was residing in the back of his throat. He watched as Joyce frantically tried to break the door down, try anything to get back inside. When she realised it was no use she let the frustrated tears fall as she stared up at him through the glass, desperation in her eyes.

“Please, Hop, don’t do this...”

He couldn't look at her. He couldn't bare to look at her any more, afraid of what he might do if he did. "I'm sorry, Joyce," he sighed.

He didn't look back up before he turned on his heel and back up the hall. Jane stood there, a conflicted expression on her face as her eyes darted between Hopper, Joyce and Will. But when she met Hopper's eyes, she knew they needed to do this and walked with him. Neither of them looked back as Joyce yelled for them to stop.

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"You sure about this, kid?" Hopper asked Jane as they headed back up the stairwell. Jane said nothing, only nodding in response. "Because when we get in there, when we get to him, he might say things, or do things, and I don't want you to get scared and--"

"Dad," Jane's soft was soft yet determined as she cut him off. The pair stopped on the landing they were walking on as Jane looked up at him. "I can do this."

Hopper frowned with a sigh. "Yeah, I know you can. I just, uh, you know I--"

She put a hand on his arm, stopping his ramblings, looking up at him with wide yet sincere eyes. "Are *you* sure about this?" she asked him, dipping her head.

Jim rubbed his beard for a moment. "Yeah, I'm sure," he crouched down in front of her and put his hands on her arms. "I just know it's been tough for you, alright. I know you never wanted to see him again, and I promised you, I *promised* you that I wouldn't let them take you and they did and I lied and I can't I..." Jim trailed off as he dipped his head in defeat, the regret and guilt of not being there to stop the bad men from taking her.

Jane lifted her hand and gently placed it on his cheek, making his eyes meet hers. "It's not your fault," she said quietly but reassuringly. "Don't be stupid," she smiled teasingly at him and Hopper breathed out a laugh.

He brought his hand to meet hers on his cheek and took it in his own,

giving it a squeeze.

“If it gets too scary in there, if you feel like you can’t do this, I just want you to leave, alright? You run, and you don’t look back,” he raised his brows at her. “Promise?”

Jane rolled her eyes. “Promise,” she nodded. Hopper placed his hand over her crown and brought her head forward, kissing her forehead. He then stood and gestured for them to continue up the stairs.

“So are you and Joyce gonna get married?” Jane blurted out as they descended the stairs.

Hopper tried his hardest not to react physically to the sudden spotlight he felt on himself. “You saw that, huh?”

Jane snorted. “Mmm-hmm,” she nodded purposefully.

Hopper glanced sideways at the girl who had a sly smirk on her face, looking far too pleased with herself. “Well after tonight I don’t think she’ll like me anymore,” Hopper admitted as they reached the top of the staircase.

“No, she’ll forgive you,” Jane said confidently and determined. “I think she loves you too.”

Hopper eyebrows raised as he peered out the window of the door that would take them to their desired floor. “It’s a little bit more complicated than that, kid,” he said, his eyes scanning and finding the coast to be clear.

Jane scoffed as they walked through the door, ignoring his comment. “So does this mean we can move in to Will’s house?” she gasped as she made a realisation. “I could have Jonathan’s room when he moves ou-“

She was cut off when a loud bang came from the end of the hall and Hopper quickly threw them up against the wall to hide, covering his mouth with her hand. As she breathed deeply against his hand, he removed it, ensuring that she was now silent. When no further noise came from the hall, he figured they were safe. He looked down to Jane with a stern brow.

“Let’s do this.”

--

When Joyce was sure Hopper wasn’t coming back around she huffed and marched away from the door. Her blood boiling she didn’t move toward the direction of the Blazer as Hopper had told her, to hell with him, she was not marching toward the bright lights of the military who had formed out the front of the building.

In her determination, she didn’t stop to think that she was in fact striding right toward heavily armed men, who immediately held up their weaponry at the sight of the two people coming into their light.

“Freeze, don’t move!” one of the six soldiers who had their guns aimed at her and her son barked at her.

Instinctively, Joyce and Will threw their hands in the air. “I’m unarmed!” Joyce yelled back in defence, the bright lights making her squint. It wasn’t exactly a true statement, the confiscated gun from the guard she had encountered earlier was still comfortably tucked away in the back of her trousers, strategically covered by her shirt.

When the soldiers looked between Will and her, they slowly lowered their weapons. Looking around her at the craziness in front of her she felt overwhelmed. There was black vans scattered in amongst flashing lights and armoured soldiers. There were official looking men arguing with one another, frantically gesturing toward the building. She suddenly felt the need to stand in front of Will, shield him from all of this. It looked like they’d just stepped onto the front line of a battle.

While she new that Brenner was wanted by the government, an unwanted stain they desperately wanted to remove, she never realised that he was this much of a big deal. What he had done was horrible, unforgiveable and down right monstrous, but that small town girl inside made her think ‘but it’s only Hawkins?’. But the illusion of it all was broken as she looked around at her, looking at soldiers and the guns in her hands and fear began to resonate in the pit of her stomach. They had brought all of this to go up against Brenner.

And Hopper was going up against him, practically alone.

Her internal panic was interrupted when she heard someone shouting her name. She lifted her eyes to find Sam Owens breaking through the soldiers and rushing toward her. She hadn't seen him since Bob's funeral, a presence of which she was unsure how to feel about. While she was grateful for everything he had done in keeping her and Hopper's families out of the fallout of Hawkins Lab, a part of her she tried to push down felt him partly responsible for Bob's death. But right now she was slightly relieved to see a familiar face.

"Joyce, goodness thank heavens your alright!" he exclaimed, bringing a hand to her face to quickly inspect the marks on her face, frowning as he did so. He then turned his attention to Will, crouching down slightly to make sure he was okay. Giving him a quick affectionate ruffle of his hair, he pulled his attention back to Joyce. "Where's Chiefo?"

Joyce looked around desperately. Then it hit her. There were so many soldiers here, seemingly standing around waiting for orders. But what were they doing out here? "Sam why aren't they in the building?"

"Joyce, wha-"

"The building, Sam, why are they out here? Why aren't they in there finding that son of a bitch?" Joyce hissed at him quickly.

Owens lifted his brows then frowned, clearly reluctant in whatever he was going to say next. "We spoke to Brenner," Owens sighed in defeat causing Joyce's eyes to widen. "Over the phone, of course. He's armed, he says if we enter the building he's going to begin killing hostages."

Joyce blinked at him before gesturing hastily between Will and herself. "Sam, we're the god damn hostages! He wouldn't kill," Joyce abruptly cut herself off, suddenly very aware of the people around her, unsure if they were to be fully trusted. "He wouldn't kill Jane," she said in a low voice, dipping her head to ensure Owens heard her. "She's too valuable to him, she's the whole reason he's here."

Owens nodded in understanding and looked away, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Well if that's the case, I don't see why we shouldn't send them in," he brought a finger to his chin, analysing the scenario before he made any orders. He turned to Joyce then, raising a brow at her then glanced at Will and back to her. "And you're sure there's no one else in there he could hurt?"

Then her heart dropped into her stomach. "Hopper," she whispered, quickly grabbing Owens' arm in a tight grip. "Hopper's still in there!" she exclaimed. She was now truly afraid for him now, especially now considering Brenner was using him a leverage. She knew for a fact Hopper would rather the men stormed the building knowing fine well the risk it posed him than have them wait, ensuring his safety, something that didn't mean a whole lot to him. In the past year and a half, that really had been all Hopper had been about; protecting the kids, protecting the town, protecting Joyce. He had sneaked into the lab, dived into the Upside Down and the tunnels and ventured to the gate all without any thought to his own safety.

While many saw blind bravery, Joyce saw past the bravery. She had seen a self-destructive nature in him. She had realised a long time ago that Jim Hopper didn't fear death, he was indifferent to death. He didn't care if he died or not, so long as he knew the people he cared about were safe, he was content with being put on the front line. It pained Joyce to know he thought like that, to see it in his eyes whenever danger arose, that empty eagerness to sacrifice himself. It pained her even more to think that, while Hopper cared so deeply for those around him, willing to die for all of them, did he actually know that they would all do the same for *him*? Somehow, Joyce knew he didn't know that.

It was then Joyce knew what she had to do.

"Sam, have you guys found a way in?" Joyce turned to him abruptly, her eyes sparkling with inspiration. When he opened his mouth to protest, she ignored him. "I don't mean to have your guys sneak in, but there must be somewhere you guys have spotted, like an exit all those guys were going out of?" the eagerness in her tone was a dead giveaway.

"Mom," Will's voice pierced through her and she stopped scheming

for a moment. She turned to him then, pleading with his big brown eyes. "You can't, it's too dangerous," he shook his head as she bent down slightly to his height, putting her hands on both his shoulders.

"Baby, listen to me," she murmured as he continued to shake his head. "What was it you said? Jane's a party member and she needs help."

"Yes, but Mom--"

"Hopper is *my* party," she said determinedly, looking deep into his eyes as he stopped shaking his head and stared back at her. "He's helped up, saved us so many times, him and Jane. I need to help them."

Will looked down at the ground, tears in his eyes. He looked up at her, a dread in his face that threatened to break Joyce's heart right there and then. "But what if you get hurt?"

She shook her head. "I'm not going to get hurt, okay, I *promise* I won't. I just need to go get them out. Then I'll come back and these guys can go in and get that bastard," she nodded at him.

Will sniffed then sighed. Reluctantly he nodded his head. She had let him stay to find Jane, it was only right that he let her go find Hopper. "Okay," he said quietly.

Joyce pulled him into a tight hug, fighting back tears of her own as she stroked the back of his head. Taking a deep breath, she pulled back from him. "Get one of these guys to call Jonathan, let him know what's going on, okay?" she asked as she brushed his hair out of his face with her finger. Will nodded in agreement.

She stood then and turned to Owens. He was looking at her with a doubtful expression.

"Joyce, I--"

"Cut the shit, Sam, just tell me how I can get in," she cut him off with an urgent tone. Owens gave her instructions regarding a door to the south of the building where they had been intercepting the escaping guards and apprehending them. He then put his hand over hers and

told her to be careful. She had nodded her thanks in response before squeezing Will's shoulder one more time, and headed back into the lab.

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Despite the noise, Hopper and Jane had found nothing along the hall. They continued to sweep along the way when they finally reached the room that Jane had left him locked in. Hopper sighed when they had opened the door to find no one in there, then quickly led her away from what had essentially been her cell for most of her life. They kept on going through the floor, just to ensure he hadn't gotten too far when Jane stopped abruptly, facing down a darkened, dead end hall.

Thinking she had seen something, Hopper was quick behind her, aiming his gun ready for something to emerge from the darkness. But when he looked at the blank expression on Jane's face, an unfocused, dazed stare, he lowered his gun and laid a hand on her back.

"What is it? Did you see something?" he asked her in a low voice, just in case there was in fact something at the end of the small hallway. Jane didn't speak, she only walked further down the hallway. Jim followed closely behind. She finally stopped at the end of the hallway, turning to the wall on her left.

The wall was cracked, dented, as though something large had been thrown up against it. She reached out and touched the wall, her eyes intently scanning the wall. Keeping her hand on the wall, she turned her head and looked at the door opposite her. Hopper followed her eyes and looked the door up and down. He didn't know what was behind it, but the uneasy look in Jane's eyes made him feel cold with uncertainty. He looked back to her, her eyes unmoving from the door. She slowly took her hand off of the wall and stepped toward the door and opened it.

Inside was a dark padded room, no windows, no light, nothing. It made Hopper think that this would be what a room in a looney bin would look like. And when he looked to Jane, the familiar, tense look on her face filled him with dread. She stood in the doorway, placing a hand on the frame, her eyes taking in the room.

"When I was bad," her quiet voice cut through the dark, causing Jim's head to whip round in her direction. "When I didn't do what Papa said, he would put me in here," her eyes stayed focused on the floor in front of her. "I don't know how long I was in here. Maybe minutes, maybe hours, I didn't know. It was so dark..."

Hopper's face fell into a saddened frown. It explained so much. Why she didn't like closed doors unless she demanded isolation. Why she had cowered in fear when a power cut had forced the cabin into darkness. His hatred for Brenner grew past its current point, a point Hopper had no idea could be surpassed. He didn't know what to say to Jane, he never did when it came to the torment she had received in this place. He knew that no matter what he said, it didn't take away from the suffering she had faced. He didn't know how to make it better.

So he did what he always did, he put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. A small but important reminder that *he* was here, that her life was with him now, that it no longer was going to be like the hell her life had been before.

"I'm not going to let this happen to you again," he nodded to himself with a stern time. Jane looked up at him, unshed tears in her eyes as she remembered the agonising time she had spent in this room. But when she looked up at Hopper, the man who had saved her, her protector, her father, she felt the pain slowly fade away. "This isn't your life anymore. It never will be again, I'm going to make sure of it."

She gave him a small smile and nodded to him. "Thank you," she murmured quietly.

He pulled her into his side, giving her a one armed hug and rested his cheek on top of her head. When she pulled away from him, he held his hand out to her. She took it without question. Hopper could've cried in the way she trusted him, she never seemed to doubt him or the fact that he do everything to protect her. She had come so far since that night he'd seen her in the woods, they both had. And he was so beyond grateful for her. He hadn't only saved her, she had saved him too.

After entering the building Joyce suddenly felt like a fool. She had no idea where Hopper and Jane were, no point of reference, no clue as to where they could be. So instead she had taken the approach to rush down the hallways, hissing Hopper's name in a rushed whisper, creeping quietly. There was no sound to indicate there was anything in her path. At the slightest noise, she felt her hand twitch toward the gun tucked away in her jeans. She had thought it better than to draw her weapon, considering how jumpy it was she would probably end up shooting Jim, or worse, Jane, the second she came across them.

But she had remained diligent as she rushed through the building.

It was then that she heard footsteps, far too pointed to belong to Hopper, far too loud to belong to Jane. And as they became louder from round the corner, she knew they were getting closer. Looking around quickly, she dipped into the closet to the left of her. Holding her breath, she could hear her heart beat in her ears. And when the footsteps halted at the end of her hallway, she clamped a hand over her mouth, the fear prickling over her skin, the hair on the back of her neck sticking up. She was reluctant to reach for the gun, not wanting to make a sound. There was no Will to save her this time, Hopper had no idea she was still in the building, she was alone.

Her eyes widened and her body stiffened when the footsteps wondered past the closet. And then they stopped, she heard them turn on the spot and she stifled a gasp when she heard them take a step toward the door. The shadow of the feet, pointed directly at her, protruded through the bottom of the door seemingly mocking her. She felt like hours past, the presence lingering there while Joyce simply stared in anticipation at the shadows. Her heart hammered against her chest, and Joyce squeezed her eyes shut, inwardly cringing from the door.

Then there was a quick slide of the floor and Joyce's eyes flew open. The shadows were gone, and the footsteps were walking away down the hall. She let out a deep breath, ready to relax when the alarm went off again, causing her to jump with fright, crashing against the shelves behind her.

“Shit,” she hissed with a whisper, the alarm ringing in her ears. And when the alarm stopped again, she prayed that it had been enough noise to cover the no doubt large clatter she’d made.

She took a moment, calmed her breathing down, made sure she heard no more footsteps. When there was practically silence on the other side of the door, she pulled the gun out of her trousers and held it out in front of her. Slowly she opened the door and stepped out.

But before she could breathe a sigh of relief, a pair of arms wrapped around her middle, pulling her tightly against them.

As she was about to let out a scream, she felt a hand cover her mouth, muffling her cries. She tried desperately to fight against the grip, to pull her arm up and shoot at whatever body part she could, but the grip around her body restricted her.

“Drop the gun,” the voice was calm, but laced with venom. It reminded her of the hiss of a snake. More significantly, it reminded her of Brenner. And she shook violently against him, tried her hardest to make any kind of sound. When Brenner calmly requested again, she shook her head and continued to struggle. It was she felt him squeeze around her middle, almost harshly pressing the air out of her, causing her to wheeze uncomfortably.

When he loosened his grip, still keeping a firm hold of her, she felt something pointed in her side. Looking down, her eyes grew large when she noticed that it was a gun he was pressing into her, she screamed against his hand and felt hot tears of fear gather in her eyes. When she still didn’t drop the gun he dug the gun into her skin, painfully.

“*Drop the fucking gun!*” he yelled in her ear, pressing his face to her cheek, causing another scream to escape her.

Reluctantly, she let the gun slip from her hand and crash to the floor. Her stomach lurched when she felt his lips stretch into a smile against her skin.

“Very good, Mrs Byers,” he murmured against her ear, the gun remained pressed against her but he had stopped it from digging into

her. She wanted to be sick, she felt her knees go weak as the tears fell from her eyes. *So much for a rescue mission.*

--

They had heard the shout echo down their hallway. Hopper had spun on his heel and aimed his gun into the empty clearing before it registered the shout was in the distance. The voice undoubtedly belonged to Brenner, but the anger, the aggression behind it had been enough to startle both Hopper and Jane. He looked down to Jane, she looked up at him, slightly nervous. Hopper's eyes went to the mark on her cheek from where Brenner had hit her, the fire that reignited within him burned out his uneasiness concerning the fact that Brenner was clearly losing control. The eerie, composed façade was fading, so much so it had allowed Brenner to strike his prized 'possession'. And Hopper and Jane had no idea what else he was capable of now.

They hastily followed the sound of the shout, but when they heard nothing more, they realised their trail had gone cold. Stopping for a moment to listen for any further indication, Jane reached up and held a hand on Hopper's arm.

"I can find him," she stated bluntly.

"No, we talked about this. Save your strength, we don't know what we could be up against," Hopper declined. In a perfect world, Jane wouldn't need to use her powers at all. But Hopper had been right, they didn't know what they were up against.

"We can't just keep running around an--"

She stopped when they heard something. Unsure what it was they had heard, they stayed silent, listening for more. It was then they heard it again, and there was no mistaking the sound this time. It was another shout. But there had been no words, no this was a shout, a wail of pain. And it hadn't come from Brenner. No it was a woman crying out.

"Was that..."

“Joyce,” Hopper’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

He didn’t wait for a second before sprinting off, as fast as his legs could carry him, Jane following close behind him. As Joyce continued to cry out, he got a clearer direction of where she was. It led him down three different hallways until the noise died out. But he had heard her voice clear as day from behind the door on his right before it was cut off. Raising his gun, he swiftly kicked the, thankfully unlocked, door down and burst into the room.

He felt his heart rise to his throat.

Joyce was stood there, clearly alive, but blood smeared on her face. She was wrapped in the arms of Brenner, one arm tight across her chest, keeping her shoulder’s square and her arms restrained. The other arm held a gun to her head. Joyce’s lip was bleeding, a fresh cut on her already bruised cheek, with now matching scratches and dripping gashes on her chin and jaw. Jim felt the gun waiver in his hand as he tried hard not to immediately break at the sight of her. Of his Joyce, battered and bruised to a pulp, hair dishevelled, lip trembling, eyes wide, knees quaking beneath her. It was enough to send him into near madness.

But then his eyes drifted to Brenner’s hands, particularly his knuckles. They were red, fresh grazes and blood speckled across them. It was clear from the moment Hopper heard Joyce’s cries that he was the culprit. But seeing his arms wrapped around her, holding a god damn gun to her head, her literal blood on his hands, made Hopper’s blood boil, a whole new anger spark within him he wasn’t entirely sure he was capable of.

When Jane entered behind him, he heard her sharp intake of breath as she gasped at the seen in front of her. In the corner of his eye, he saw her instinctively raise her hand.

“Jane, don’t...” Hopper cautioned, unsure if she had even heard him.

It was when Brenner cocked his gun at Joyce’s temple, making her squirm in fear in his grasp, that Jane stilted her movement.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Brenner warned, a knowing smirk

on his face. His eyes twinkled as he took in the horror on Hopper's face and the conflict on Jane's.

Jane slowly lowered her hand, never taking her eyes off of Brenner.

"Let her go, Brenner," Hopper stated, aiming his gun more thoroughly at him.

"Well of course, Jim," Brenner smiled eerily at him. "So long as you hand over the girl."

Hopper shook his head. "This isn't a negotiation, let Joyce go *now*."

Brenner chuckled darkly and turned his gaze to Jane. "I don't want to kill her, child. But if you don't come with me, I may just have to."

"Jane, don't d-" Joyce called out to her but was abruptly cut off as Brenner dug the barrel of the gun into her temple and twisted causing her to groan in pain, her body stiffening. Hopper and Jane both took a step forward defensively. They abruptly froze when Brenner glared between the pair of them. He smiled then, revelling in the control he now had over the three of them.

Jane looked up at Hopper, her large brown eyes filled with uncertainty. This hadn't been part of the plan, and now she didn't know what to do. Brenner watched her look up at Jim, waiting for his actions.

"I told you, child, he's not your father," Brenner intercepted, drawing Jane's attention back to him. "You can't even trust him. Did he ever tell you the truth?" When Jane looked at him with a questioning gaze, Brenner's eyes sparked. "He didn't tell you, did he? About how he got Will back?"

"Don't..." Hopper cautioned him and Brenner flashed him a proud smile that made Hopper's blood run cold.

"He came here, with Mrs Byers here," he tightened his grip on Joyce and she hissed against him until he loosened his hold ever so slightly. "And we made a deal," Brenner eyes went back to Jane. "I let him go into that *place* to save the boy. And in exchange, he told me where you were." Jane's head snapped round to Hopper and looked to him

with disbelieving eyes. Hopper couldn't bring himself to look at her as she kept her gaze fixed on him. "He called you my 'little science experiment', didn't you Chief?" Hopper's eyes narrowed into slits at Brenner.

"He betrayed you," Brenner bluntly exclaimed. Tears sprang to Jane's eyes as she continued to stare up at him, her mouth agape.

"Stop it." Hopper raised his voice slightly, his voice betraying him as he felt the guilt wash over him, unable to look Jane in the eyes. Every one of Brenner's words were hitting her, stinging her.

"He gave you up so easily, back then. What's to stop him now?"

"That's enough!" Hopper barked at Brenner who remained unfazed by Hopper's outburst, his eyes staying on Jane, proudly watching her face fall apart.

"You can't trust him, Eleven."

Jane's head whipped around then. The hurt clear on her face, glancing between Hopper and Brenner. The betrayal in her eyes, the tears that were beginning to fall made Hopper want to drop to his knees. He wanted to beg for her forgiveness, tell her how sorry he was, hold her until that face was gone. But he knew, he knew deep down that it wouldn't be enough.

"You lied," her voice was quiet, cracked and broken, choking back sobs. "Friends don't lie," he could hear the heartbreak in her voice. He felt his world begin to crumble again.

"Jane, I'm sorry, I-

"This whole time, you lied," she turned her feet toward him, stepping closer to him. "You used me. I am *nothing* to you. I never have been," she shook her head, tears pouring furiously as she clenched her jaw.

"Jane, please, you know that's not tr-

"Stop *lying*!" she screamed then, moving her hand up and sending Hopper flying into the wall at the side of the room. Joyce cried out in fright. He painfully crashed against it, knocking his head violently, no

doubt drawing blood. He slumped to the ground with a pained groan.

An overwhelmed Jane's knees buckled underneath her as she fell to the floor, her nose bleeding slightly. He knew she wasn't exhausted, he had seen her do a lot more than send a man flying across a room and still be fit for fighting. But as he watched her face distorted into tired sobs, he knew that she wasn't drained from her powers. No, this was her emotions draining her. The hurt, his betrayal, her realisation that she shouldn't have trusted him, should never have called him 'Dad' was succumbing her, dragging her down. Joyce made a move to reach out of her, unable to bare the sight of her arguably adopted daughter crumbling in front of her, but Brenner dragged her back.

It was then that Jane's eyes came up to meet Brenner's. Her tears seemed to still slightly and Hopper felt the air leave his lungs when she reached out toward him.

"Papa," she cried, defeatedly. Hopper's stomach lurched and he felt bile sit in his throat. "I wanna go home," she choked.

Hopper's jaw dropped to the floor. Brenner's expression softened as he let go of Joyce, lightly pushing her off to the side and coming down to crouch in front of Jane. Jane hesitated for a moment, taking in the closeness of Brenner, reading his face as she tried to even her breathing. Brenner seemed to go the same thing before slowly reaching up and tucking a hair behind her ear, cupping her cheek in process.

Jim wanted to cry out when Jane slowly crept forward, looping her arms around Brenner's middle and sobbing into his shoulder. He stroked her hair and murmured 'my child' in a disturbing attempt to be comforting as she cried, apologising to him over and over again. Hopper's eyes flew up to Joyce briefly who was looking back at him with sadness. Sadness for his girl, hell, *their* girl, going back to the man who made her life hell in a moment of blind grief. Hopper felt tears form in his eyes. He had tried so hard to give her a home, give her a family, a life, love. But it hadn't been enough. It could never have been enough after what he had done, he realised that now. He stood up, feeling his feet involuntarily begin to drag him toward Jane. He wanted to hold out to her, take her away from his evil, and somehow try to make her see sense, try to get her to forgive him.

He stopped, suddenly, when Jane shifted her head so that her eyes were peering over Brenner's shoulder, looking right at Hopper. Her tears were gone, her face still. There was a sharp determination in her eyes that made Hopper freeze. She let out another sob, but her eyes didn't move, nothing in her face did apart from her mouth. And when she murmured another 'I'm sorry', Hopper knew it wasn't for Brenner. Because before Hopper could take another step, he was thrust right back into the wall with a loud thud.

Brenner pulled away from Jane at the loud noise and that was all the leeway she needed to send him flying into the back wall of the room.

Only this time, she didn't let him fall to the ground, she kept him pinned there as she had done before. With a bend of her neck, she broke his wrist, sending the gun in his hand to the floor. He let out a yelp in pain, but she kept her glaring eyes focused on his head.

"Jane, no, stop!" Hopper got back up to his feet again, but with her other hand she held her arm about behind her and flicked her wrist, sending him sliding across the ground, keeping him there. He watched in a conflicted horror as Brenner writhed under the invisible force keeping him suspended in air and pinned to the wall.

The lights began to flicker uncontrollably, parts of the metal furniture began to float. Her power ricocheting around the room. Joyce stepped toward Jane in protest, trying to stop but Jane nodded toward her, sliding her along the floor as she had done Hopper.

She turned her gaze back toward Brenner and watched in angered satisfaction as he choked under her force. He was the man who had hurt her, the man who had hurt Mama, the man who wanted to hurt Joyce and Will and Hopper. He had poked and prodded at her, abused her, manipulated her, denied her of a real, proper childhood. Flashes of him experimenting on her, locking her away, harming her in obscene ways danced around her mind, fuelling her anger.

"Jane, don't do this, please don't!" Hopper yelled behind her, but she didn't listen. She continued to choke Brenner who fought hard to try and lift his body away from the wall. "If you do this, they'll take you away again," Hopper warned, his voice going desperate. His words seemed to get to her slightly as her head tilted that little inch. "I'll

never be able to see you again,” he shouted defeatedly, he had meant it to be a way to make her stop. But now he was thinking about life without her and his chest tightened.

Suddenly the flashes of Brenner’s abuse began to become entwined with other memories. Memories of Hopper bringing her to the cabin, of them happily cleaning the place up, of his embarrassing dancing. Memories of Hopper slipping his blue hair tie on her wrist just before taking her to the snowball, their multiple nights spent on the couch watching movies, laughing and goofing around together. And then the memory of earlier that day of her riding around his back, giggling with him.

“You’ll never see your friends again,” Hopper added. “You’ll never see Mike.”

That hit a significant nerve. Her hand trembled. “Mike,” she whispered. The tears of fury in eyes were quickly replaced with the horrific idea of a life without Mike. Her Mike...

“Don’t be the monster he tried to make you.”

Jane hesitated for a moment. And then the lights stopped flickering, the furniture stopped floating and landed with a gentle thud. Brenner fell to the ground and Jane turned back toward Hopper who was now rising to his feet. The blood from her nose was dripping into her mouth, and red had begun to form around her ears as it did when she was beginning to step over the boundaries of her power. He quickly rushed to her, falling to his knees just as he caught her, scooping her into his embrace.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” she whispered quietly into the crook of his neck.

“Shhh, it’s okay, kid, it’s okay,” he squeezed her tight against her, closing his eyes as he felt sweet relief flow through him. He rubbed the back of her head.

“I’m sorry I hurt your head,” she mumbled apologetically.

He let out a soft chuckle and shook his head. “Hey, it was part of

your little performance,” he pulled away from her, wiping a loose tear from her cheek as he smiled at her. “I gotta admit you had me fooled for a second there.” She shyly smiled and dipped her head.

But it was when she dipped her head he saw the movement behind her. His eyes immediately looked up to see Joyce, now back on her feet. Aiming the gun at a startled and dishevelled looking Brenner.

“Joyce what are you doing?” Hopper said quickly, attempting to keep his voice calm.

Joyce didn’t look at him, her eyes unblinking as she daggered Brenner on the ground before her.

“You said it yourself, Hop,” she cocked the gun at him, causing Brenner to flinch. “We can’t let him get away.”

Hopper looked to Jane who’s head looked between Joyce and Hopper. “That doesn’t mean we kill him, Joyce,” Hopper said in a wary tone as he slowly began to pull himself up.

“Why shouldn’t we? A son of a bitch like him doesn’t deserve to *breathe*,” she hissed angrily, her gaze burning into him. “He hurt Jane, he tortured her. He was going to torture me. He took my son from me,” Hopper took a cautious step towards her as her voice began to break. “He made Jane open that gate, he let that *thing* get through and hurt my boy. Those things that killed...” Joyce let out a sob, the memories overflowing in her. Hopper took another step toward him.

“My son almost died! Twice! Because of *you*!” she screamed at Brenner who seemed to curl up into himself at her scathing voice.

Joyce sighed, trying to reign in whatever little control she had left. “Everything that’s happened, everything terrible is because of him,” she gasped out a sob, her hand beginning to shake.

“Joyce,” Hopper voice was as soft as he could muster given the situation. He took one final step toward her, closing the distance between him as he stood facing her side. From where he stood he could see the utter turmoil on her face, her eyes red and stinging with

tears. Her shoulders were shaking, her lower lip trembling. He cautiously reached out, gently putting his hand on her chin.

“Joyce, look at me,” he murmured, delicately pulling her head toward him. Her eyes flashed up to him, her pupils appearing to dilate as she took in the soft, yet rigid expression on his face. Her mouth opened as if she were about to say something, but the words became stuck in her throat and all she could let out was a strangled whimper.

He placed his hand on top of the hand that was holding the gun. “You’re not a killer, Joyce,” he whispered to her, applying a little bit of pressure to her hand. It didn’t take much, as she seemed to lower the gun with ease with the assistance of her touch.

She turned back to Brenner, still defensively curled on the ground, eyes wild and frantically staring back at Joyce. Hopper took in her face then, cupping her cheeks with his hands. Battered and bruised, he felt the anger in the pit of his stomach that had subsided now reignite stronger than ever. Joyce’s saw the rage flare behind his gaze when she brought her eyes back to his face. Instinctively she brought her hand to his hair, running her fingers through it delicately before lightly placing her hand on his cheek, hoping to calm him down.

She looked to Jane, who was now staring at Brenner intensely. Afraid she may do something again, Joyce gently tapped Hopper’s face, the anger in him clearly not fading.

“Let’s go home,” she whispered, her tone faintly pleading with him.

Hopper’s gaze softened as he looked back at Joyce, still so beautiful and strong despite the blood and bruises that cascaded her face. But he couldn’t help the twinge that brought his attention back to Brenner. He dipped his head.

“Take Jane, and get out of here,” Hopper said through gritted teeth, grasping for a final thread of control.

He felt Joyce’s hand grow firm on his cheek as her eyebrows knotted. “Hopper, no-“

"I'll be right behind you," he brought his eyes back to her. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his cuffs and gestured them to Joyce. "I need to make sure he doesn't get away."

Joyce let out a relieved sigh. "I can stay with you..."

"No," he shook his head gently, running a hand through her hair, silently reassuring her. "I need to do this alone. And I don't want Jane here for a second longer."

Joyce nodded shakily. She knew Hopper was safe, there was no way Brenner could hurt him. But still...

Her thoughts were interrupted when Hopper pulled her close to him and placed a hard kiss on her forehead. She let out a small gasp as they simply breathed together for a moment. He rested his forehead against hers. She wanted to tell him then. But it wasn't the right time, they both knew that. Not with their tormenter on the floor at their feet and Hopper's daughter stood there on the verge of murder.

Taking in a sharp breath, Joyce nodded, more to herself rather than to him. She pulled away from him and walked toward Jane. Jane's eye ripped from Brenner and looked up at Joyce apologetically.

"I'm sorry I pushed you," she said quietly, looking at the floor with guilt. Joyce gave her a small smile and took the girl by the hand. Joyce still thought it amusing that the girl was now the same height as her, growing almost as quickly as Mike Wheeler these days. Jane looked up at Joyce, her guilt fading the tiniest fragment as she took in Joyce's kind eyes.

"It's alright, sweetheart," Joyce squeezed her hand and began to lead her away, but her feet remained planted toward Brenner. Joyce turned and put a guiding hand on Jane's shoulder. "He can't hurt you anymore. He'll never hurt you again."

Jane took a deep breath. And for the last time, she stared at Brenner's evil, pale face and let Joyce lead her away. The second she stepped over the door, she began to feel the weight on her chest begin to lift. Like a breath of fresh air, like she was finally beginning to feel somewhat free.

Hopper waited until Joyce and Jane were out of sight, and then a little bit after that to ensure they were out earshot. Hopper cracked his knuckles by stretching out his fingers and curling them into fists at his side. He carried the handcuffs over to Brenner, the metallic sound of the chain clinking together echoing through the now silent room.

“Jim, please-“

Hopper cut off the pale, white haired man by grabbing him by the collar and connecting his fist with his cheek and nose. Brenner groaned in pain, but not loud enough for Hopper to be even remotely satisfied. So he crouched down, and did it again, his knuckles crunching against Brenner’s now broken nose. This time he got the noise he wanted from Brenner. Only partially satisfied, he kept his hold on Brenner’s collar and dragged him across the floor to the steel table in the corner.

He crouched in front of Brenner and began to get to work on cuffing him to the table leg.

“Now, you’ve probably got about a hundred questions right now. But you’re done talking so I’m gonna take a shot in the dark and answer the three question I’m pretty sure are at the top of your list,” Hopper grumbled as he took a hold of Brenner’s broken wrist and pinned it against the metal, causing him to hiss in pain.

“First question, why didn’t I let Jane kill you? Well, that’s an easy one,” Jim shrugged as he manoeuvred the first hole of the cuff round the chair leg. “You see, I spent a lot of time with her in the past year and a half. Teaching her, feeding her, protecting her, look after her, basically all the things you neglected to do. And in that time, she became her own person, she’s smart, funny, caring, she likes to dance, and as much as I hate it she fucking loves Cyndi Lauper,” Hopper chuckled to himself then. “She’s a good kid. A really good kid. But you never saw that. All you saw was a weapon,” Hopper couldn’t help himself and wrapped his hand around his wrist again, causing Brenner to call out.

“And when I saw her do that to you. As much I would’ve loved to have watch her tear your heart from your chest, or explode your

brain or whatever the hell else it was you kept trying to get her to do, I couldn't let her. Because she has come so far, she's her own person now and most importantly, she finally gets to be a real kid. She has friends, she has a family that loves her, she has a life. And while I'm not exactly someone to get in the way of other people's revenge, I couldn't let her throw that all away. I couldn't let her be that weapon you tried to make her," he spat at him, angrily, before calming himself down slightly. Brenner cringed when he heard the sound of the handcuff clicking into place around the table leg.

"Second question," he began as he grabbed Brenner's broken wrist and placed the cool metal around it. "Why didn't I let Joyce kill you? Hell, I'll probably keep asking myself that. Because frankly, she more than deserved to put a bullet in your brain. She wasn't wrong about all the shit you've done that's hurt her and her family." Brenner winced as Hopper tightly clicked the cuff around his wrist, almost cutting off the blood flow all together. "But I was right when I said she wasn't a killer. Joyce is a lot of things, she's smart, beautiful, and god damn if she isn't so far out of my league," Hopper shook his head and raised his brows. "Above all, she's strong. She has so much on her conscience, a lot of it your fault, a lot of it from long before your sorry ass came into our lives. But she can't have another death on her shoulders. I couldn't let her do that to herself. As much as I wanted to see her shoot you down like a dog in the street."

Hopper leaned back from Brenner and ran a hand through his hair, looking him over, happy with the fact there was no way he was getting out.

"She'll never be normal, Jim," Brenner choked out, blood dripping from his mouth.

"No, no she won't," Hopper shook his head, smiling slightly. "But she'll be happy. She'll have a life."

Brenner chuckled, a strained, dry sound. "Surely you can't be that naïve," he coughed. "She's too dangerous, you won't be able to handle her."

Hopper scrubbed his face with his hand and scratched his beard. "Yeah, maybe so. But I'm gonna try. I'm going to try, every damn

day, to help her, take care of her,” Hopper nodded. “She deserves that much at least,” he sighed and looked away from Brenner, and when his eyes met his again there was a twinge of happiness in his eyes that Brenner couldn’t quite understand.

“Which brings me to the final question,” Hopper leaned back and sat down. “Why am I not going to kill you?” Brenner smirked at him then, and Hopper was tempted to punch him one more time. “I was in ‘Nam, I was a city cop, I’ve got plenty of blood on my hands. One more wouldn’t hurt. Especially when it’s a sick son of a bitch such as yourself,” Brenner chuckled then, and Hopper’s mouth formed a straight line.

“I’m not the one who deserves to kill you,” Hopper mused, almost wanting to smile at the confusion that came across Brenner’s face. “Joyce and Jane, sure yeah, they deserved to kill you. But like I said, I’m not gonna let them go into that dark place. But there’s someone else who’s already in that dark place, who I would have no qualms about killing you,” the confusion on Brenner’s face only grew. “You see, last year, Jane went on a little field trip to Chicago. And she met up with her sister.”

Brenner’s face completely fell and Hopper wished he could play the moment on a loop for the rest of his days.

“Yeah one of the other kids you liked to torture. The one who could make people see whatever she wanted them to see,” Hopper smirked as Brenner’s eyes widened in realisation. “And she was already in the process of picking off your men one by one. So I wonder how she would feel, how easy it would be for her to find you, if she knew that you were locked up, with no chance of escape?”

“Hopper...” Brenner began, unsure of what to say.

“I’d imagine it’d be pretty easy for her to break into an armed facility, what with her abilities and all,” Hopper shrugged nonchalantly before stepping to his feet, not taking his eyes off the horror on Brenner’s face. “The men outside, they’re gonna come in here, they’re gonna take you away, lock you up and throw away the key. And then you’re gonna wait. Maybe days, maybe months, but you’ll wait. But one day she’s going to come for you,” Hopper’s tone

took a dark turn as he stared down the man on the ground, the helpless man with once menacingly calm eyes, now looked like he'd seen a ghost. "And when she does, well, I'm not one to condone murder, but when she gets to you, and believe me, she will. I'll make sure of it, if I have to. Your sorry, worthless, pathetic life will come to an end, I'd like to think pretty slowly too, from what Jane tells me she's got one hell of a temper, guess it runs in the family," Hopper raised his brows at Brenner. "And we'll all be able to sleep a little easier at night knowing that you won't be able to hurt us, won't be able to hurt anyone else."

"Jim, please, I can make you a deal!" Brenner held out his hand to Hopper, who only stepped back out of his reach in response.

Hopper took one final look at him, basking in the sight of the wretched man who nearly destroyed their lives, cuffed and defenceless, practically begging at Hopper's feet.

"Goodbye, Brenner," Hopper grumbled, turning on his heel and walking out the door.

The sound of Brenner shouting out for him, begging him, pleading to let him go, the desperation evident in his cries, as he walked away, was like music to Hopper's ears.

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When Joyce and Jane reached the exit, they were not greeted with the same defence that Will and Joyce received early. No this time, the soldier's weapons were lowered and barely any of them looked at the pair. Joyce figured that was Owens' orders, to turn a blind eye to whatever came out the door. She was thankful for that as she led Jane through the array of military and black cars and men in suits. At the back of the frontline, was Owens, who was looking at the building with a panicked dread. But when he saw Joyce and Jane approach him, his eyes lit up with relief. But as he approached the pair of them, his face fell again.

"Heavens, Joyce what happened?!" Owens doted over her when they reached him, his hands gently going to her face and inspecting the multiple scrapes and bruises on her face. He looked to Jane then and

saw her nose had been bleeding and crouched down in front of her. "Jane, are you alright?" he murmured to the child.

Ever since forging her birth certificate, Owens had often checked in with Hopper and Jane, checked to make sure they were okay, see if they ever needed anything, that sort of thing. While Jane was still wary of him, despite Hopper explaining to her that he was different to the bad men, she had warmed to him ever so slightly over the past few months. And she was always appreciated his attempts to be kind and joke with her. She gave him a small, shy smile in response to his fussing.

"We're fine, Sam," Joyce interceded, putting an arm around Jane's shoulder and rubbing it gently.

"Where's Jim?" Owens looked between them frantically.

"He's fine, he's just coming," Joyce held up a hand as she saw the million panicked thoughts fly through Owens' eyes. Owens gave furrowed his brows at her, wondering what he could possibly be doing in there, then decided he was best not knowing and gave them a warm smile.

"Well, your eldest is here, he's just back there," Owens nodded to her then turned to Jane with a sly smile. "And there is a young man back there who is just *dying* to see you, little lady."

Jane immediately felt her heartbeat increase dramatically and she stiffened under Joyce's touch. Joyce wanted to laugh slightly, the whole way back to the exit, Jane had appeared exhausted, completely drained by the night she had had. But now she was practically jumping out of her skin with excitement. Joyce nodded her thanks to Owens as the pair moved passed him and toward the back of the crowd.

And sure enough, there by the old beat up car, was Jonathan and Nancy, fussing over a rather tired looking Will, and next to Will stood...

"Mike!" Jane shouted, a slight break in her voice as her emotions took over. And then she was sprinting over to the group, and Mike

was running too.

Their two bodies clashed together fiercely as Jane wrapped her arms around Mike's neck and wrapped his arms around her middle, pulling her into the air for a second. The two teenagers clung to each other desperately as Jane let all the feelings inside of her rush to the surface, burying her head in Mike's shoulder as he soothed her hair. Joyce admired the sweet scene as she walked past them and toward her sons.

Jonathan was already tearing up before she reached them, pulling her into his arms, completely towering over her. She breathed him in as her own tears began to fall. He murmured his 'sorry's about not being able to stop the bad men and she whacked him lightly, telling him not to blame himself, that there was nothing he could've done before squeezing him around the middle. When he pulled away from her, her heart sank at the horror on his face.

"Jesus, Mom, what happened?!" Jonathan gasped as he took in her features.

"Language, Jonathan!" she swatted him lightly. Jesus was it really that bad? When his face didn't falter she reassured him that she was fine. She then moved to Will who sleepily embraced her, and she felt him smile the crook of her neck as she rubbed the back of his hair. "I'll get you home soon, sweetie," she murmured against his hair before planting a kiss on his crown.

She pulled away from him and turned to Nancy, pulling her into her embrace. She had always liked Nancy, way back when she was a little girl playing in the sandbox with Jonathan way back when. The admiration had only grown over the years as she helped their family fight against otherworldly beings. And the way she had brought Jonathan out of his shell, the way she made Jonathan so lovesick and happy, only made Joyce love her more and more.

"Oh, Nancy your mom is going to kill me," Joyce groaned as she tightly held the girl against her. Nancy laughed softly as Joyce let her go.

She shrugged and rolled her eyes. "I'm sure she'll understand, Mrs

Byers,” Nancy smiled causing Joyce to smile back at her.

“Hey, Mom, where’s Hopper?” Jonathan perked up, a concern in his tone that Joyce thought rather sweet despite their situation.

“He’s just-“ but when Joyce looked behind her, and saw that Jim still hadn’t shown up, the small panic began to sit in. There was no way Brenner could have killed him, the man was practically crippled now and Hopper was armed but nevertheless a hundred dangerous scenarios flooded her imagination. Her chest tightened and her stomach began to flip, the fear creeping over her skin.

But just before it took over, she saw that tall, imposingly large figure in the distance and her heart began to hammer in her chest. And when he came into view, she could’ve cried with excitement and happiness and relief.

Hopper walked toward the group, passing Jane who was currently crying with happiness at the sight of the Wheeler boy. As he passed them, he locked eyes with Mike, who was currently soothing Jane with a constant string of ‘it’s okay, El, I’m here’s (Mike was the one of the few people still allowed by Jane to call her El, as she had seen the name had originated with him, that it was *his* name for her and no one else’s). When Mike’s eyes met his own he saw the spark before he ripped his gaze away from Hopper. The kid was angry, there was no denying it. Angry with Hopper for not telling him what was going on, angry for not letting him help, maybe even angry at him for letting this happen in the first place. But his anger would need to wait for another time.

Because right now, all Hopper wanted was to reunite with his makeshift family.

He hugged Jonathan first, who incoherently thanked him for saving his family, and Hopper resisted the urge to deny him. After all, they had all practically saved themselves. And the state of his mother’s face reminded him that he could’ve done a better job. He then put a hand on Nancy’s shoulder, giving her a half smile as he playfully scolded her for sneaking out with her brother, but he was thankful all the same for bringing Mike and Jonathan with her. When he got to Will, he picked the small boy up in his arms and spun him around

gently, holding him tight against him.

"I knew you could do it, kid," he praised the boy who laughed sheepishly as Hopper set him back down on the ground. "You were so brave, you did so good." Will grinned in response. "Thanks, y'know, for saving your mom," Hopper added gruffly as he stared at the ground, almost guiltily. Guilty that he had been unable to save her, and that the task had fallen to a 14 year old boy.

Will's eyes were baggy and the exhaustion was evident on his face. Yet he still managed to muster the energy to give Hopper a cheeky grin and mock salute. "All in a days work, Chief," he teased with a small laugh.

"Smartass," Hopper affectionately grumbled as he ruffled the boys hair.

It was then he turned to Joyce. She had her arms folded across her chest as she stared at the ground in a nervous defiance. She was angry with him, he could tell. Angry for leaving her out of his plan, for literally throwing her out of his way and leaving her behind. But he could also tell in the way she bit her lip and hung her head, that she knew he was angry with her too. Angry for running back into the crossfire, for getting herself captured, for nearly getting herself killed *again*.

However, much like his anticipated fallout with Mike, that would have to wait for now. Because now all he wanted to do was pull her close to him. And so he did. He strode over to her, her head lifting slightly in surprise at the determination in his steps. He hesitated for half a moment before wrapping his arms around her and scooping her off the ground and into his embrace. She gasped with fright at first before reciprocating his hold on her by wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face into him. They didn't say anything, they let their bodies do that for them.

Hopper felt fresh tears spring to his eyes as he became overwhelmed with the sensation of her in his arms, alive and breathing. He shuddered with emotion when she pressed kisses along his neck then, quickly leading up to his head and placing a hard kiss on his hair. They were alive, somehow, they were both alive. Sure there were a

couple of new scars that had opened up, but for once they had all come out of this alive. And Hopper gripped Joyce tightly to him, almost pressing the air out of her as he basked in the feel of her. Twice in one night had he thought he'd lost her. And twice he had been able to hold her in his arms, knowing that he hadn't in fact lost her forever.

When his arms felt a twinge of discomfort, he gently placed her down on the ground. He looked at her, a half smile on his lips, the same look on her face. They both knew what was going to come next, but they knew right now wasn't the time. Because today, they went against the bad guys and they actually won. Hopper turned to face the kids in front of him, leaning against the car with his hands in his pockets. Joyce quietly came to join him, standing by his side.

He then pulled a much needed cigarette from his jacket pocket and lit up. He took two draws before passing it to Joyce who accepted it with a smile. Once she exhaled she passed it back to him, leaning her head against the side of his chest. They watched as the kids excitedly interacted. Mike and Jane had wandered back over to the others, with Jane and Will pulling each other into a tight embrace before breaking apart so Will could enthusiastically reiterate his story of having saved his mother from the evil guard in the hallway. Joyce smiled in amusement at the pure joy on her youngest's face as he told his tale.

Hopper beamed with pride as he watched the scene, and instinctively wrapped his arm around Joyce's shoulders, who brought her hand up to hold his. He reached over and kissed the top of her head as they held each other the same way they had that night at the Snowball. And then they stood in silence as they watched over their family. This little, broken, dysfunctional family that they had somehow put together. The pair of them looked upon their children, and the Wheeler children they had gradually become to love as their own, and smiled contentedly.

Hopper felt the sad happiness swell in the pit of his stomach. His family was safe. The black hole had come, but it hadn't taken anyone. Not this time. No, this time, on this night, everyone had survived. They would live to fight another day. They would live to survive another day.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much to everyone who has read this. To those of you who have left kudos and comments, I am so unbelievably grateful for your love of this fic, it has really touched me! And huge thank you to @starmaammke for giving me this inspired prompt, I have thoroughly enjoyed writing this story.

There will be an epilogue posted within the next couple of days so keep your eyes peeled!